

The goose is getting fat!

Reading: Isaiah 25.1-9

*On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
A feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
Of rich food filled with marrow,
Of well-aged wines strained clear.
And he will destroy on this mountain
The shroud that is cast over all peoples,
The sheet that is spread over all nations,
He will swallow up death forever. Isaiah 25.6-7*

***Christmas is coming! The goose is getting fat,
Please to put a penny in the old man's hat.
If you haven't got a penny, a ha'penny will do.
If you haven't got a ha'penny, a farthing will do.
If you haven't got a farthing — God bless you!
(Traditional)***

There's a lot of history in nursery rhymes. This one of course goes back to a time when the goose, not the turkey, was the centre-piece of Christmas dinner. From medieval days right through to the Victorian depiction in Charles Dickens, the goose has remained the ubiquitous Christmas bird throughout Europe. Geese were driven in from Lincolnshire in their thousands for the famous Nottingham Goose Fair. The goose was a common farmyard bird and a natural forager that came in handy after the harvest. When turned loose in the stubble, geese could find and devour all the scattered grain that would otherwise be lost. Thus, a goose was at its fattest (and tastiest) after the harvest, just in time for the coming feast.

But what's really shocking about this nursery rhyme is what **hasn't** changed. Christmas plenty cheek-by-jowl with Christmas poverty, feasting with fasting. *Please to put a penny in the old man's hat*: but it could just as easily be a young man (with his dog), driven by who knows what misfortune to begging on the streets, outside the glittering Christmas shops. The trials of Covid haven't made life easier for anyone — but the problems that push people into homelessness haven't gone away. They're just less visible, now that we do our Christmas shopping on-line (and we probably haven't got any spare change in our pockets, let alone a farthing).

The contrast between poverty and plenty always seems particularly gross at Christmas. In her Christmas story of *The Cloak*, Patricia M. St John tells the story of Mustapha, a young homeless boy living on the streets of a Moroccan city. It is Christmas Eve, and the streets are busy with rich Europeans and their children, buying food and presents for the Christmas feast.

“What do these Christians *do* at Christmas?” asks a young shoe-shine boy, watching from the shadows.

“They get drunk and stuff themselves with food,” says another, “and buy presents for their children.”

“Yes, but why?” persists the first boy. “What is the feast about?”

“It’s the birthday of their prophet, Jesus,” says a third. “I was in their hospital once, and they read to us out of their holy book: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” The other boys laughed as he mimicked the doctor’s foreign accent.

But the words stuck in Mustapha’s mind. *Loving* and *giving* reminded him of his mother, who had loved him and given him her cloak, the only warm covering she possessed — and died peacefully in the bitter winter cold, having given all she could. Life on the streets was all about hating and grabbing and fighting — it seemed a long way away from *loving and giving*. The story tells how Mustapha loses his precious cloak, and finds it again, and in the process finds that there is a way of loving and giving, even for a homeless boy who has nothing to give. The search leads him to a fisherman’s hut on the salt flats, and a new-born baby, and a sick child — and it’s there that he discovers the meaning of Christmas, not among the rich, busy shoppers, but among the poorest of the poor. [You can read the story in Patricia M. St John, *The Secret of the Fourth Candle*, Scripture Union 1977.]

It’s usually round about the second week of Advent that I make myself sit down to do something about my Christmas giving — not a penny in the hat, but a small response to the desperate needs all around us (more than ever this year). A small step towards participating in the Christmas economy of *loving and giving* — in response to the greatest gift of all. This year the PCC has made it easy to give through our Christmas Appeal — as Robin explains below. Or of course you can give to your own chosen Christmas charity!

God bless, Loveday

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7th December 2020

The St. Philip & St. James Christmas Appeal

The St Philip & St James **Christmas Appeal** gives those of us who have not suffered too badly during this terrible year, to help other people who have had a much harder time.

By joining our giving together, we hope to make a larger impact across our community. The money which we collect will be divided equally between the following seven charities.

Booth's Centre (Homelessness Charity in Manchester)

East Cheshire Hospice (supporting local people who are terminally ill at this very challenging time)

The Children's Society (supporting vulnerable children in the UK)

0161 Community (Supporting unemployed people in Greater Manchester)

Mothers Union Key Workers Appeal (supporting key worker families)

Christian Aid Chicken Project (supporting grassroots development in the third world)

Boaz Trust (supporting destitute asylum seekers in Manchester)

If you wish to donate to the appeal you can either:

- write a cheque made payable to "The Parochial Church Council of St Philip & St James Alderley Edge", write Christmas Appeal on the back and post it to The Vicarage, Church Lane, Alderley Edge, SK9 7UZ OR
- transfer money electronically to The Parochial Church Council of St Philip & St James Alderley Edge sort code 20-53-77 A/C No 40696668 and write Christmas Appeal as a reference.
- **Please make your donation before Christmas if possible**

Or if you prefer you can donate directly to any of the charities concerned.

- <https://www.boothcentre.org.uk/donate.html>
- <https://www.eastcheshirehospice.org.uk/donate-now/>
- <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/how-you-can-help/donate>
- <http://0161community.com/support-us/>
- <https://www.mothersunion.org/thank-you-keyworker-appeal>
- <https://charity-gifts.christianaid.org.uk/products/pair-of-chickens>
- <https://www.boaztrust.org.uk/pages/6-donate-today>