



# THE INQUIRER

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The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians



## Inside this issue...

Jean Bradley takes modern lessons from the Nativity

Frank Walker writes on heroic mothers

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## The wonder of Christmas

We may find it amongst  
our memories, writes  
Art Lester



## Christmas Will Come

Christmas will come.  
When the nights are so long that even the day is dark,  
and the world's balloon is a fugitive from the sky,  
when hope seeps out of our collective life like breath,  
like the wind punched from a downed fighter,  
Christmas will come.

Christmas will come.  
When the woman who carries the children of men,  
swollen with shame and miracle,  
is given no place for the beginning of the human story,  
when the doors are shut against children,  
when there is no room for the needy outside the hovels of the making-do,  
when the future of our faith lies homeless in the straw and ashes,  
and no one much cares,  
when an animal cries for its lot,  
Christmas will come.

Christmas will come.  
When a man, wronged by circumstance and prophecy,  
is cheated by his God,  
when a man is denied his due,  
marries an empty dream,  
and still is ruled by mercy,

when a man who refuses to give in to the iron laws of this world  
and lights a small candle in the hearth of fate,  
Christmas will come.

Christmas will come,  
when the baby is helpless and dependent,  
when the little saviour who would, in time,  
raise Lazarus,  
cannot even bring life to its own lips,  
when the hungry child is brought to the breast,  
Christmas will come.

The kings will come later.  
The shepherds will hasten to the good news.  
Tonight, in the lowliest manger in Caesar's kingdom,  
as it is in the hearts of the poor,  
as it always is in the moments afforded to the discarded, the lost, those who are failing to stave off death,  
as it is to all who light candles in the night,  
Christmas has come.

Poem from 'Heart-Treasure for the Mother of the World', a book of Christmas and holiday poems by the Rev Bob Janis, who formerly served as a minister in the Merseyside District. It is available from Waterstones at: <https://tinyurl.com/JanisPoems> and Blackwells: <https://tinyurl.com/XmasJanis>  
Also available on Kindle.  
*Shutterstock illustration*

With a bittersweet combination of doubt and awe, we seek meaning in Christmas, says **Art Lester**

# Wonder redux



Shown above: Pixabay photo

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**Charles Dickens nailed it: Christmas isn't just a holiday, it's a time machine. We may not be troubled by Marley's ghost, but we might all benefit from a trip into our past, just to see whether something important could have been forgotten.**

**So, as remote as it may seem now, let's cast our minds back as far as we can, to the early Christmases of our childhoods. Remember?**

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You're a young child, and you've just lived through one of the longest nights there ever can be. As you lay in your bed, sleepless and willing time to pass quickly, your ears alert to every sound. Creaking floorboards, groaning pipes, the laughter of revellers on the street outside. Each half-heard sound carried possibility: reindeer on the roof, elves, a fat man somehow wedged inside a chimney.

Perhaps the physics of the deed had already begun to trouble you: how does everyone's Lego, Barbie, football and play tea set manage to fit into one sack? How fast do the reindeer have to fly to make it to your cousin's place in another city? How far away is the North Pole? Above all, how does Father Christmas know what you want? What you deserve?

You speculate. If I sneak out of bed now, gently take the dressing gown from the bedpost without making even a rustling sound and tiptoe downstairs, will I encounter a stranger? And if I do, what will happen when he realises he has been seen? Will the jolly old guy be angry? What will he do?

It's almost unbearable. The normal, everyday life you have inhabited throughout your brief time on the planet seems not to be so normal and everyday after all. There are strange forces at work, things that can be joyous, but also terrifying. What you are dealing with is a serious case—

“We go to extreme lengths to try and recapture the sense of mystery and awe that, somehow, gives life not definitions, but *meaning.*”

perhaps your first ever case—of what we call wonder. Wonder. Let me give you two dictionary definitions of the word. The first is the one most heard today. The new cheerful atheists encourage you to do it. Car manufacturers try to inspire it in television commercials. Michael Jackson named his unrealistic estate in honour of it: ‘A feeling of amazement and admiration caused by something beautiful, remarkable, or unfamiliar.’ This sense of wonder is linked to another word: awe,

which also includes elements of veneration and even fear. But wonder is something nice, we feel everybody should have some, like figgy pudding.

The second definition seems strangely at odds with the first. Wonder, as a verb, means ‘to feel doubt’. As in this sentence, ‘Many people began to wonder if the banking industry was entirely honest.’ But it could be that the two definitions belong together. Maybe as the child lies wide-eyed in her bedroom, wondering if a mysterious being in a red suit is downstairs, she is also wondering if it could be true. Maybe as the dutiful priest is preparing his Christmas homily, wondering at the miracle of the holy birth 2000 years ago in Bethlehem, he is also wondering if it could really have happened. Maybe the delightful sense of wonder we love to see in the eyes of our children also contains the seeds of doubt.

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# THE INQUIRER

The Unitarian and Free Christian Paper

Established in 1842, The Inquirer is the oldest nonconformist religious newspaper.

**“To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition.”**

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## Inquiring Words...

May God's home be in the arms  
of the homeless and the refugee,  
may God's ceremony be justice,  
may God's tribute be surrender.  
May God's righteousness be the poor, confirmed,  
and may God's river be the very stream  
where she is taking her old grey coat, right now.

**Bob Janis**

## EC election in January

**Elizabeth Slade asks: Could you serve the movement?**

We are approaching an election for the Executive Committee - the trustees of the charity that serves our wider membership, and upholds our charitable objectives.

This is an exciting time to be part of this leadership group, because of the nature of the challenges we are facing. Covid brought closer to home the fragility of many of our congregations, but also displayed the creativity and care they hold. We know that 'more of the same' could lead to chapels closing in the not-too-distant future, and we know in a movement like ours, the path to the future must be found locally, not imposed from the top down.

So the work of leadership from Essex Hall is akin to that of gardeners - tending the soil, nurturing the seedlings, supporting the mighty oaks, taking care of the compost, having an eye on the weather, and the keeping the whole ecosystem in view.

That's not to say it's not important for Executive Committee members to be holding a vision for a thriving Unitarian ecosystem - we absolutely need people who are tuned in to a vision of a thriving future, and are able to embody and communicate this to others. But the way we work is in collaboration, and in paying attention to what is bubbling up within our movement and beyond.

Successful candidates would be working alongside the Revs Jo James, and Celia Cartwright, along with Jenny Jacobs as EC members, and Honorary Treasurer the Rev Dr Rob Whiteman.

There is no 'must-have' set of experiences - you might have been a trustee of a charity, you might have management experience, you might have professional or volunteer experience of governance, communications, people management, fundraising, finance, change management, or some other expertise that you wish to share. We need EC members to be comfortable working at the national level, while having an understanding of the local.

We normally meet for dinner on the night before a 9 to 5 board meeting, and these happen usually in London every couple of months through the year, except for a longer meeting over two nights usually at the Nightingale Centre in Great Hucklow. (I say 'usually' because we can find ways to be flexible to EC members' circumstances.) We sometimes have Zoom meetings too, but find that the space around the in-person meetings is valuable for building relationships.

If you have questions about the role, or would like an informal chat, do get in touch. If you have a glimmer of interest, please do follow that thread, even if you aren't sure you fit the bill!

**Elizabeth Slade is chief officer of the Unitarian General Assembly**

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