

Here is some 21<sup>st</sup> century advice for Mary and Joseph, 1<sup>st</sup> century parents:

“Nursery rhymes form an important part of your baby’s cognitive development. The lyrics of these rhymes help your child to learn about the alphabet, numbers, animals, and various day-to-day elements.”

Well, I guess we’ve got the incarnation wrong if we think that Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem and Son of the eternal Father, was born in time with a fully developed vocabulary and knowledge of day-to-day elements. The whole point of this celebration is that the Godhead is veiled in flesh as an authentic human person: “pleased as man with man to be” in the non-specific gendered words of Charles Wesley. So baby needs and baby sounds are the authentication of this mystery of God made man, the Word made flesh, as is the task of learning to speak our language, and negotiate the social processes of our ordinary, time-conditioned life.

But I want to go back to nursery rhymes to claim more for them than perhaps we allow. They have a capacity to teach us things that we, with our adult sophistication, might overlook. So let’s consider this one:

Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been? I’ve been to London to see the Queen. Pussy cat, pussy cat, what did you there? I frightened a little mouse under her chair.

It’s at least 200 years old, and might refer to the first Queen Elizabeth, or perhaps the bountiful Queen Anne. On first hearing it seems to be just nonsense, but further consideration suggests a more serious observation that does in fact illuminate this Christmas celebration.

This rhyme is about a meeting between the exceptional and the domestic. There is nothing more domestic than the family pussycat, asleep in front of the fire. But that is what has been transposed into the bustling life of the royal court in

London, the nation's capital. And in this context the domestic behaves according to its own nature and in its own way. The regal emblem of sovereignty, the throne, is where the nature of being a pussycat finds its outlet, as a preventative measure against mice.

Children are delighted by this meeting of apparently contrary worlds – in part that's why we remember this rhyme long into our adult lives. The sadness is that we can be persuaded by the demands of adult life to abandon our fascination and delight in any meeting that is not about money and success.

But today, in the festivity of Christmas, we are released again into the world of childhood, in order to be free to discover that the co-incidence between two apparently contrary worlds might be reality and truth. Today we assert the reality of the meeting between eternity and time, between the infinity of God and the frailty of the human condition, between heaven and earth.

And the teachers of the Christian faith encourage us to recognise that the revelation of God in flesh and blood and human life like ours is not simply a photo on a Christmas card: this is the unveiling of an irrevocable, everlasting relationship between God and humanity, in which we learn to inhabit the nature of divine life, because it is our destiny and in which God experiences the distinctive character of human life, which is the limiting impact of time and ultimately of death.

If pussy cats go to London to the seat of majesty and authority, then human beings go to Heaven, where they see God in glory, face to face. If pussy cats frighten mice, because they do and it is their nature, then human persons uniquely worship God, because they can, and it is their dignity and delight in the fulfilment of their whole desire.

The nursery rhyme that teaches children about the day-to-day elements of life has its counterpart in the rhythms of Christian worship – its seasons, its rituals, its liturgy, hymns and anthems – which teach us about the earth-to-heaven elements of our destiny.

In the collection of inherited carols, we find that there is a nursery rhyme approach not so different from the pussy cat, pussy cat verse I have quoted. The lullaby carols sing to the Christ child, offering a wrapping of fur for warmth and a gentle rocking of the cradle. We have gone, not to London, but to Bethlehem, where we recover our capacity for a distinctive cognitive understanding – the capacity for faith in God.

In the Choruses from *The Rock*, T S Eliot reflects on how the consumerism of contemporary society can eliminate our capacity for imagination and mystery. He asks,

“Where is the Life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

An answer to these questions comes from the musician, John Eliot Gardner, who rightly and boldly observes that music deployed on earth in the service of the eternal worship of heaven can assist us to recover the life, the wisdom and the knowledge we are in danger of losing. He again quotes Eliot to suggest that music can convey “a tremor of bliss, a wink of heaven, a whisper, [that] I would no longer be denied” access to heaven.

The imagery of our Christmas carols is not an escapist fantasy. It is serious judgement on government in turmoil, on our disregard for the balance of nature entrusted to us as stewards, and on the causes of human migration and misery on a vast scale. These carols call us to a new education about the only things

that matter and on which we as a generation shall be judged: they are justice, peace, freedom and safety, our economy, the attitudes that shape our language, our treatment of animals and of each other – the lessons of the nursery rhyme, actually, but on a global scale as lessons for adults and children alike.

It is the Christ child who calls us to this new education, and we should not ignore the crying of that child, for the future of our life together depends upon it.

O holy child of Bethlehem descend to us, we pray, gladden us with your presence and may the joy, wisdom and hope that you bring inspire in us a very happy Christmas that will shape the year to come.