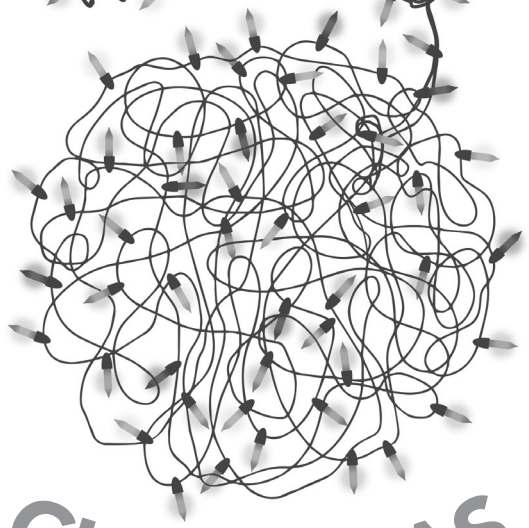
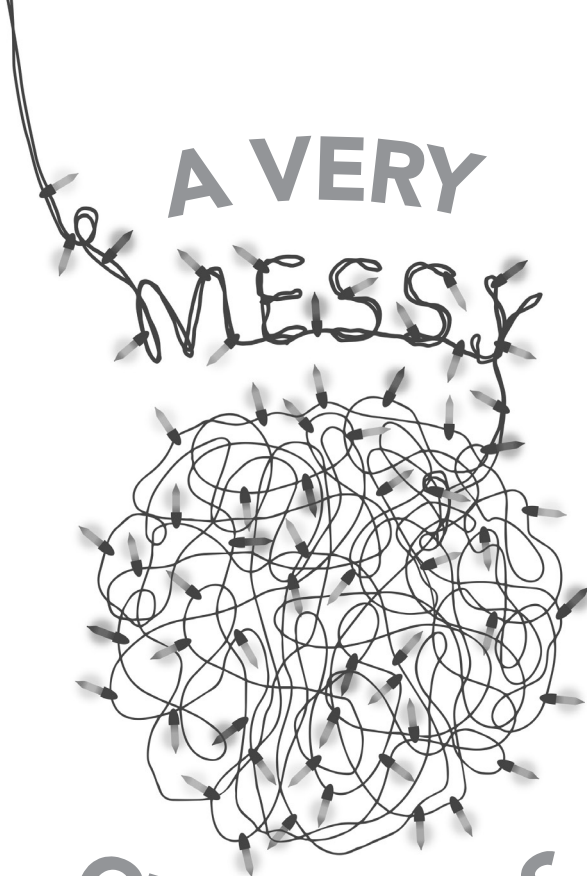


A VERY

MESSY



CHRISTMAS



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JAGO WYNNE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRIS DENNEMONT

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For Theo
(as our other three children already have a book
dedicated to them!)

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A TIME FOR JOY?

Christmas is a time for joy.

Whether it's the novelty reindeer antlers or the sprig of mistletoe hanging invitingly from the ceiling; the lights on the tree or the stocking full of presents; the Christmas movie on TV or the glass of mulled wine, Christmas is a time for joy.

I don't know if you have a favourite Christmas memory. Perhaps something about a Christmas in years gone by – either a one-off event or a tradition each year – causes you to smile with that feeling of contented joy. My favourite memory is from my childhood and involves my Grandpa. He was a farmer, and each year we'd all go to stay at my grandparents' farmhouse. If you crammed us all in, it could sleep about fifteen once we had sourced a few extra camp beds. All the family came together, including my brother and three other similar-aged cousins.

We kids would delightedly head out to climb on the hay bales or head up to explore the secret passages in the attic. However, without doubt, the highlight was Santa Claus visiting us in person every Christmas Day afternoon, soon after the Queen's speech had been on TV – a moment at 3p.m. that almost every self-respecting British citizen tunes in for.

Every year, Grandpa went for a quick snooze after he had listened to the Queen, and every year, he sadly missed seeing Santa Claus. Every year, we'd hear the noise of bells from Santa's reindeer, although we never did actually catch a glimpse of the reindeer. But we'd rush to the window of Grandpa's wooden-beamed study, and peer out into the fading light across the garden. And then, with expectation building, Santa would appear from behind the fir tree, carrying a couple of giant, red, felt sacks stuffed full of presents. We'd welcome him in and he'd hand out our presents, bringing us all such delight and cracking the odd joke as he went about his task. Sometimes, Granny would give him a quick kiss, which was a little confusing, and then, with his sacks emptied, he was gone.

Grandpa generally tottered downstairs from his half-hour horizontal about five minutes too late to see Santa.

I may have got older, and possibly even a little wiser about the reality of Christmas traditions, but I still reckon Christmas is a wonderful time for joy. And yet ...

THE MESS OF THE WORLD

I have no wish to be accused of being a giant party pooper. I write this whilst dearly looking forward to Christmas 2021, and yet I'm all too aware that the last two years have been a mess for nearly every human on the planet due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Do you remember the opening scene of the 2017 movie *Paddington 2*? You're transported back in time to when Paddington is a tiny, orphaned bear cub in darkest Peru. You see this drenched, little furry bear clinging onto a log floating down the giant Amazon River. He is fearful and in distress, and understandably so. That journey down the river mirrors how many of us felt over the course of the pandemic.

Uncertainty was all too great a reality. Potential dangers lurked ahead – both in our own lives and as we looked out at the world at large. Each of us had a sense of trying to pick a course through life, but ended up getting buffeted from one lockdown to another, or worse, by the currents of the pandemic.

And whilst the mess of the pandemic may have receded where I live in the UK, due to most people being vaccinated, we're not exactly mess-free. Many predict that a cancer crisis will follow the Covid crisis because so many people missed checks for the disease during the pandemic. When we face up to our own personal concerns about health or finances or relationships, or the more public concerns that are highlighted by the media, our joyous Christmas bubble is deflated all too rapidly. Joy turns to the reality of despair.

It means that if we think about God at all at Christmas, if we think He might possibly exist, then we come to Him with all sorts of questions, even accusations.

Maybe the 'where' question: 'Where are you, God? This world's a mess – it's screwed up. Where are you?'



Or the 'why' question: 'Why is there all this trouble? God, why do you let there be evil in this world?'