

## Christmas Eve 2021

In a faraway country there was once a wonderful church. It stood on a high hill in a great city. Every Sunday and on holidays like Christmas hundreds of people climbed the hill to the church. It was a magnificent church but the most wonderful and unusual thing about the church was the sound of its bells. The bells were at the top of a very tall tower and their sound was very special. The bells were Christmas bells. They were not meant to be played by anyone nor were they heard on common days.

But the sad fact was that the bells had not been heard for years and years. It was the custom on the night before Christmas, Christmas Eve, for all the people to bring their gifts for the baby Jesus to the church. When the greatest and best gift was given, the music of the Christmas bells would be heard. It came from far up the high tower and it was the sweetest sound you could possibly hear. But for many long years, the bells did not ring. Every Christmas Eve rich people tried to give better gifts than anyone else. Each year there were many gifts, but the bells in the tower did not ring.

Far away from the city in a country village lived a boy named Pedro and his young brother. They knew very little about the Christmas bells, but they had heard about the religious service in the church on Christmas Eve. On this particular Christmas Eve they had decided they would walk to the church for this beautiful service.

The day before Christmas was very cold, there was snow in the air, the ground was hard and white with ice. As they were about to enter the city, they came across a poor woman who had fallen. She was too sick and too tired to keep going. Soon she would be so sound asleep that no one would ever wake her again. Pedro knelt beside her and tried to wake her, but to no avail.

'It's no use, little brother,' he said. 'I need to stay and look after her. You will have to go alone.' 'Alone?' said the little brother. 'And you will not see the Christmas service?'

'No,' said Pedro. 'This poor woman will freeze to death if nobody looks after her. You go, but when you come back you can bring someone to help her. And you can tell me all about the service when you get back. Take this small coin I brought and give it to the baby Jesus when no one is looking.'

The little brother reluctantly hurried off to the city. The great church was beautiful that night. When the hundreds of people sang, the walls shook with the sound. Towards the end of the service the time came for people to give their gifts to the baby Jesus. Precious gifts were presented. Lastly, the king himself came forward. He took his jewel hat from his head and offered it as a gift.

'Surely,' everyone said, 'we will hear the bells now. Nothing like this has happened before.'

But all they heard was the cold wind in the tower. The people shook their heads. Was this story about the bells just a myth?

The giving of gifts was over and everyone began the closing carol. Suddenly the man playing the organ stopped. Everyone looked at the old priest. He was standing at the front holding his hand up for silence.

Not a sound could be heard from anyone in the church. But as the people listened, there came softly but clearly through the air the sound of bells. The music was sweeter than anything that had been heard before. The music seemed to rise and fall in the sky.

People sat transfixed. Then as one they stood together. They looked at the front of the church to see what great gift had caused the bells to ring. All they could see was a small child. Pedro's little brother had moved quietly to the front of the church when no one was looking and had given the baby Jesus the small silver coin.

Now the question is this – this is a story about giving, but is it a story about the coin or is it a story about Pedro stopping to help the poor woman? Both acts are about the sacrifice of giving, and there is certainly a message for us in both acts, but the heart of the story lies in Pedro stopping to help the woman. That is why the Christmas bells rang. If the boys had walked past the woman so that they could get to the service in order to give their coin, there is no way the bells would have rung.

The story has shades of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The Christmas message of giving, and the message at the heart of this story, is that it is in giving of ourselves – our time, our energy, our love – that we put into practice the ethic of giving that is central to everything that Jesus stood for. Christmas should be our annual reminder, our annual wake-up call.