

Church News December 2018

By the Glow of the Christmas Candle

“The Christmas bells are ringing out from the old village church, embracing my mind. No bell chimes as beautifully as the Christmas bells of our childhood village. I can still hear the deep, soft chime and wish that they would ring for me every Christmas time and follow me on my journey to the land of my childhood.” Morten Korch.

In my childhood home we had a lot of Christmas traditions. One of them happened on Christmas Day where we'd meet at my grandparents with uncles and aunts, and all our cousins. After afternoon tea we lit the candles on the Christmas tree which had been put up in the drawing room, and then we would all walk around the tree singing Christmas hymns. My grandparents' Christmas tree had been decorated with white plaited Christmas stars, trumpet blowing angels in white card, white candles, fairy hair and a shining star on top. Then we'd sit down, and grandma would read us a story from a collection of Christmas stories called “By the Glow of the Christmas Candle.” They were all devotional stories with a message to reflect on. I still remember the message in one of the stories: It was a story about a village church with a special bell. During the annual collection the congregation would walk past the altar placing their gift on the altar, and according to legend the church bells would start ringing when the greatest gift was put down. On this Sunday the church was absolutely packed. There was a rumour going around that this year the greatest gift of all time would be donated, and the bells would definitely ring. The congregation felt the warmth in each other's closeness, whilst the cold and the snow were lashing the windows. During the hymn after the sermon the congregation started moving up the aisle towards the altar in order to place their gift there. All the gentry and landowners were there as well, and they were watched closely as they proceeded towards the altar. The church was completely silent as each one of them placed their bag of money on the altar. Everyone listened intently, but there was no chiming. The queue of church goers lining up to place their gift on the altar became ever shorter. The last person to place his gift was one of the many farmers who had had to sell his ancestral farm earlier in the year because of a failed harvest. At the very moment he placed his last coin on the altar, and the congregation had resigned themselves to the fact that the church bells probably wouldn't chime this year either, the bells started chiming the purest, most beautiful tune. The biggest gift had been given to the church. What was considered worthless in the eyes of the world, had found grace with God.

The whole story was told in true Morten Korch style, and the message was that the human measure for justice and injustice was turned upside down when compared with God's mercy. When all statistics, prognoses, and predictions failed to deliver, the Christmas message brought it home to us in my grandparents' sitting room that year.

These days there is not much “Morten Korch” about our Christmas, and I don't know anyone who still reads aloud from “By the Glow of the Christmas Candle”, but the message and the church bells from my childhood town are still reverberating, and it reminds me, that there is hope and joy for us all which is not based on our achievements, diagnoses, guilt, shame or good deeds.

I wish you all a very happy Christmas, and I look forward to seeing you at one of our Christmas services in New Zealand 2018.