

A VISIT FROM COVID-19 humbly offered by Michael Nettleton ¹

'Twas the time before Christmas, when all through the town
Not a creature was stirring — we all were locked down;
With memories of Christmases past — and ago —
What would happen this year? How could anyone know?

What would happen to gatherings? How would we prepare?
What would happen to gifts, and the hugs that we share?
Nine months of pandemic, and here we are — asking:
How on earth do we celebrate Christmas with masking?

At home, decorations we hang to inspire us —
Or distract us, from fears of the pandemic virus.
So a scramble of questions racked my brain with insistence:
How does Christmas come when we keep social distance?

Having pondered and wrestled this whole thorny matter
The answer arrived in my brain with a clatter —
The obvious answer, it seems, says the chorus,
Is always the one, that lies right here, before us.

Think back to the spring when our worship was cancelled
And our church was closed up from the nave to the chancel,
When Rebecca and Harris took cellphones in hand,
And ZOOM was a word meaning speed on the land!

Then what to our wondering screens should appear,
But our music director, and eight choristers dear:
Come Christopher! Shaun! Come Erin! and Anna!
Come Jim and Joanne! Elias! and Rada!

In solos and duets the choristers they chorused,
With click tracks and uploads and harmonies gorgeous;
And sermons from rooftops and places so varied,
Our insights were nurtured and spirits were carried.

While the virus removed us from each other's presence —
Like the Grinch can't steal Christmas by stealing our presents
It won't stop our "Christmas from coming! It came!
Somehow or other, it came just the same! ...

"It comes without ribbons! It comes without tags!
It comes without packages, boxes, or bags!" ²
Community, it seems, is much more than a place —
Maybe a mindset, a welcome, a feeling of grace ...

So think back to Bethlehem, so long from today,
Where Joseph was seeking just some place to stay,
And Mary was waiting, so tired and so worn,
Just praying for somewhere for her Child to be born.

All others were nestled, each snug in a bed
With not one bed free — there's no room, they said. ³
And return to our own time — not just in pandemic —
Our world leaves out so many, with exclusion endemic.

In this time before Christmas, our separations are real —
Perhaps we now sense how exclusion must feel —
As we gather tonight, in fellowship and song,
Let's forget not the rights for which so many long ...

May we share with each other — and all that we meet —
A sense of community — in our world, on our street;
Wherever we are, and wherever we wend,
May your Christmas be merry — and peace be with you, my friend.

¹ with apologies to Clement Clark Moore

² from *How The Grinch Stole Christmas* by Dr Seuss

³ these five lines inspired by a version by Sister St Thomas