

LOVE, SURELY

Two years ago, *Empire* film magazine chose the top ten Christmas films of all time. You're unlikely to guess which film tops the list. It's *Die Hard*. And it started one of those huge but trivial online debates. *Die Hard* is an amazing thriller, but for many, just setting it at Christmas doesn't make two hours of killing and destruction in a skyscraper very Christmassy.

In second place was *It's a Wonderful Life*. Third was *Elf* and fourth place was occupied by the film many now associate most with Christmas: *Love, Actually*. The films of Richard Curtis always deliver us a particular kind of London. A place full of attractive, witty, caring friends who live in stylish loft conversions on the south bank. Who are always available to drink lattes with you in hipster, brick walled cafes and offer amusing advice on your love life as you regale them with its latest twist. A London where the streets are covered in crisp, white snow unsullied by car tyres and where the pavements are full of generous, smiling strangers who laugh when you bump into them and make clever and kindly remarks as you pass by.

Can someone please tell us where this London is?

It's been described as richardcurtisland, and it's pretty much how we see the Christmas nativity scene. The stable is warm and cosy. The stars shine brightly in the sky. The cattle are neatly arranged around the baby. Mary has a smile broader and whiter than a youthful Donny Osmond. The hay is inviting like a fluffy pillow. And the shepherds get the first selfies with the baby in the background.

The reality would have been very different. Dingy, bug-ridden stable. Perilous birth among farm animals. No post-natal care or wider family on hand. And a paranoid and ruthless leader in Herod, hot on their tails. If ever anyone were entitled to say: *I'm a celebrity, get me out of here*, it was the Son of God at his birth. There was no pomp and ceremony for Jesus. No luxury or comfort. He began life downwardly mobile.

The nativity story sends us a coded message we easily miss. It's there for all whose lives are taking a wrong turning, which is so many more people than would have been true two Christmases ago. Many of our lives are messed up like that stable. The pandemic may well have done this to us. Even if it hasn't, we are frequently tempted to pretend to others we're totally sorted when we're not because we're afraid they'll think less of us.

If we're on our knees right now, wondering how we'll get through Christmas and stay afloat in the new year, I believe God is saying to us: I've been there, in the middle of shattered plans. Like James Stewart's character in *It's a Wonderful Life*, we mean more to others than we could possibly imagine. And we are loved by God in Christ with a love deeper than the deepest stars in space.

With you the peace and hope found at the heart of Christmas,

Simon Burton-Jones
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