

To know is not simply to know arithmetic
By Geoff Wood

Christmas seems out of place in modern times. It's like we are entering a season where sleighs and reindeer are our way of getting about, when evergreen trees are brought into our houses and made resplendent with ornaments and lights – for reasons long forgotten. It's a season for holly leaves entwined into wreaths to welcome strangers – again for reasons long forgotten. It's about houses themselves bedecked with lights – as in the film *Home Alone* – until a whole neighborhood becomes a page out of a storybook.

It's a season when stables appear under Christmas trees or even outside on snowy lawns – inhabited by a holy family and attended by shepherds and wise men we never see at any other time of the year. It's when rock music and punk rock and whatever they call that stuff that usually bursts our eardrums on radio and TV soundtracks give way to carols (choral singing) like *Adeste Fideles* and *Silent Night* or just jolly things like *Jingle Bells* and *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*. Granted the season is almost swamped by commercialism, by a deluge of products issuing from the factories of our modern world – somehow even they arrive in colorful gift wrappings, whatever the gadgets they contain.

So why this relapse into scenes right out of St. Luke and St. Matthew or the London of Tiny Tim? It's because, thank God, we still live in something other than just a modern world. By modern I mean the world that has evolved over the past four hundred years in which science and technology have had a grip on everyday life. Not that science and technology are bad – we benefit much from their power to finesse nature into speed, warmth, efficiency, longer lives . . . But it so dominates our lives that nothing else can be true if not the result of strict experiment, mathematical truth – existence by the numbers. Imagination, wishing, fantasy, wanting to know more than $e=mc^2$ or the Periodic Table of Elements can only lead to an incorrect knowledge of our universe – myths, legend, “fake news” - that's all.

I once came across a scientific guide to buying a house. Its intent was to prevent the buyer from choosing too hastily. It listed all the things the buyer might want to check: the size of the house he wanted, size of the lot, style of the house, garage space, ground maintenance factors, commute distances, proximity to schools, quality of schools, proximity to markets, price, lenders, points, utility costs, crime rate, future development – all you should know if you want to make a correct purchase, a sure thing.

And then I imagined a couple checking those items from house to house, their guideline thumb worn from use – only to enter a shady lane and coming to a For Sale sign in front of an ivy-covered cottage right out of Peter Rabbit – and exclaiming: This is it! And the basis for their judgment? Not the checklist but the charm of the place – the appeal of the place to something deeper within them than their brain – even if the place needs its plumbing repaired and maybe solar heat.

In other words, they were not just looking for a house but for a home – and that's what this season of Christmas offers us, a world that can be a home and not just a freeway. As when I say I don't just want to know the facts the laboratories may reveal. I also want to know if I am loved, if I am worth anything . . . and that's the kind of knowledge seasons like Christmas bestow – beyond the range of any empirical checklist.