

# ***15. Magpie and Christmas***



What was that in magpie's beak?

Magpie had dropped down onto the table in front of me, carrying something.

At first I thought it was an insect, but then it was shiny.

Looking more closely I saw that it was one of those very small bulbs which are used in strings of Christmas lights.

“What are you doing with that?” I asked.

It was certainly not something to be swallowed.

“I'm taking it home to my nest,” magpie explained.

“But it's a Christmas light,” I said. “What are you going to do with it?”

“Oh, I’ve got lots of them. I put them into the nest, all around the side of the nest and they shine,” he explained.

“But they won’t shine without electricity, magpie,” I said. “Where did you get them?”

“I know they won’t shine that way, but they shine in the sun. I got them from the Christmas lights which people hang on their trees and their houses.”

I had wondered why some strings of Christmas lights had gaps. This was very strange, but before I could ask, he went on:

“They have Christmas. I want to have Christmas, too.”





What could magpie possibly understand about Christmas, I thought. So I asked, “So what do you think Christmas is about?”

Magpie responded very confidently. “Of course I know what Christmas means. It’s all about baby Jesus and his father, Santa, and Mary his mother. He was born in a shelter where lots of magpies used to roost and they sang songs to him and swooped down on anyone who came near. He came to be friends with us magpies and teach us how to share.”

I was puzzled. How could I help magpie sort all this out? So I started with Santa Claus. “Santa Claus is short for St Nicholas who was a bishop a long time ago who used to visit children at Christmas time bringing them rewards if they were good or punishment if they were bad. And these days people talk about Santa as an old man dressed in red with a white beard who brings gifts and rides in a sleigh drawn by reindeer. But he’s not Jesus’ father.”

I waited for magpie to react. I think he understood, but then he continued, “And Jesus came to open supermarkets where people could buy presents and if you look, every supermarket has decorations at Christmas time, to remember that Jesus started people having supermarkets and that’s where I find these little light bulbs.”



I didn’t want to offend magpie, but I felt I needed to help him get it right. So I said: “Magpie, Jesus didn’t invent supermarkets. He came to teach people how to share.”

“That’s what I said,” chirped magpie, a little impatiently. “He came to be friends with us magpies and teach us how to share.”

“Well, not just magpies,” I said, “people, too.” I didn’t know anything about Jesus and magpies and I’m sure he was just making that up or perhaps it was an old magpie story. People make up stories about Christmas, so why shouldn’t magpies?

Magpie was silent for a long time and I wondered what he was thinking. Then he said: “When I sit in our nest with all those lights around me, I feel like I’m sitting in the centre of the universe.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. “We all belong together, you, humans, and we, magpies. We belong to the universe, to God’s creation, and in Jesus we know what God wants and what makes the universe work,” he continued.

He certainly got that right. I was amazed, even if he got some of the details wrong earlier.



“At Christmas time you will see us taking a walk in the bush and across lawns with our young ones, looking for worms. And as they squawk, we take the worms to them in our beaks and feed them. And sometimes we find birds that are weak or don’t have mothers and fathers, and we feed them, too. Have you seen us lately?”

Yes, I had, in fact. You see these big birds, the same size as their parents, still chirping like baby birds and running around wanting to be fed.



“We feed our children, too,” I answered. “And we also think about people who don’t have food and feed them, too, or help others feed them. Sometimes they are people in our communities.



Sometimes they live in countries a long way away and all we can do is send money to help others to feed them there where they live.”

Magpie look at me very intently. “Do you really care about people like that, like the way Jesus taught us? I mostly see you humans just keeping it all for yourselves and not doing much sharing at all. And you fight and you are mean and you try to kill magpies!”

I knew what was coming next. Magpie was going to tell me that humans climb into the trees to destroy their nests and that’s why they fly down and peck at them sometimes. I had heard that before. It wasn’t true.

“Yes,” I said, “we do care, just like you, and, yes, there are some people who at Christmas time think only of themselves and never share.”



Magpie shuffled his feathers back into place, made sure he had a good grip on the little light bulb, which he had placed on the table during our conversation, and smiling with a tilt of his head as only magpies can do, nodded goodbye to me and flew off up into the trees. I knew he understood.



He left me with a nice memory which I would carry into Christmas Day. He also left a little white blob on the table, which I knew I would need to clean off before we could eat there.

I sensed that he had also dropped some of his wrong ideas about Christmas and I wished more people I knew would do that, too.