

Christmas Morning

From a distance there is a harmony
And it echoes through the land
It's the voice of hope
It's the voice of peace
It's the voice of every man

From a distance we all have enough
And no one is in need
And there are no guns, no bombs and no disease
No hungry mouths to feed

God is watching us
God is watching us
God is watching us from a distance

From a distance I just cannot comprehend
What all this fighting's for
From a distance there is harmony
And it echoes through the land
And it's the hope of hopes

It's the love of loves
It's the heart of every man
It's the hope of hopes
It's the love of loves
This is the song for every man

God is watching us
God is watching us
God is watching us from a distance

These are the lyrics of the song *From a Distance* by the singer song-writer Julie Gold, which became a hit for Bette Midler in 1991. It's undoubtedly a beautiful song with a heart-warming melody and lyrics with that universal appeal that has everyone dewy-eyed and huggy. The You Tube video has a small band of children overcoming all our hatreds and prejudices with Bette Midler peering longingly out to the distance. What could possible be wrong with this?

Now far be it from me to inject a good dollop of bah humbug on this Christmas morning, and I wouldn't want to question the sentiments of the song. But there is one thing which is very terribly wrong with it. God may be, and indeed is, many things, but what he is emphatically not is watching us *from a distance*.

For what does watching at a distance mean? It means sitting in the armchair watching endless re-runs of *Frozen*, eating Quality Street while the squabbling takes place in the other room. At a distance means keeping your distance, justifying the distance by saying, 'well, they've got to sort it out.' At a distance means being distant, having only, in the end, a peripheral connection with the people who are distant.

But, emphatically, God is not like that at all. In fact, he doesn't know how to keep distant. Our God doesn't keep his distance; instead he comes up, close and personal.

Christmas is about how God went to great lengths to relate to people who needed God but weren't sure how much they much wanted God. Celebrating Christmas means going to such lengths to relate to people who need us but who aren't sure they want us. Christmas is all about how we might want to keep a distance, but how God refuses to.

This is not a spiritual God, a remote God, a God 'out there,' This is a *material* God, a God who can't stop himself reaching out and reducing the distance to a nothing, hugging those whom no one hugs, eating with those with whom no one eats, listening to those to whom no one listens, touching those whom no one touches, remembering those whom no one remembers, loving those whom no one loves.

This is what God did at Christmas: this is what Jesus is about: and this is what we can do at Christmas. It's about celebrating a material God. Godly materialists seek God in human form. Godly materialists are shepherds roaming in Bethlehem, looking for Jesus among teenage parents and homeless people and those who live among farm animals. Godly materialists remember Jesus's parents fleeing Bethlehem for Egypt, and are on the lookout for Jesus among immigrants and refugees and those in fear of their lives in a new country. Godly materialists recall the wise men travelling to find Jesus in a manger, and so they're always seeking wisdom among strangers.

As the eyes of the baby Jesus opened for the first time, he saw instinctive, unconditional love; he saw the rudiments of creation in the stable; he saw curiosity in the form of the shepherds' visit; he saw humility and worship in the obeisance of the wise men. But what did *they* see? What do *we* see when we gaze on the infant in the crib? Mystery, attraction, love, a desire to see where this might take us all. At that precise moment, at his holy birth, much is yet to come. But if we are aware of anything at all, it is and awareness of a God who is not remote, eyeing things from afar. Instead, we see a God who is unutterably, unbearably close, and who is not interested at all in keeping his distance.