

40 years ago, the Swedish writer and moviemaker, Tage Danielsson, wrote a story about a 14-year-old boy. This boy had found his own way to celebrate Christmas. In the movie, 14-year-old Karl-Bertil Jonsson has a job with the Swedish Postal Service. Every Christmas the Postal Service needs temporary staff. And his job is to distribute parcels. A week before Christmas, his special moment arrives. He collects all the big parcels, which are the gifts for the VIPs, the very important people, and secretly reorganises them. He readdresses all the parcels and has them delivered on Christmas Eve to the homes of poor families.

He is a kind of small-time Christmas-Robin-Hood who, at Christmas at least, wants to see that a bit of justice is done.

What do people find so fascinating about this boy who, secretly and in constant fear of being discovered, takes such a big risk?

Even now, half of Sweden takes a break from the celebrations during prime family time to sit in front of the TV and dive into this magical story.

Do people still have a sense of justice?

A sense that there is a gift: of justice, hope, and attention to those who are small and insignificant: who are otherwise never in the spotlight.

At least at Christmas?

Christmas is the celebration of the "meek and lowly".

Has someone made us look small during the past year?

I often hear teenagers say: So-and-so beat me up! That guy made me look small!

Most of the time, when they talk in this way, they are speaking about their teachers. Maybe the teacher was simply telling the truth about their behaviour or their performance at school. That, in itself, is enough. Sometimes truth takes some getting used to, when it's about me.

He made me look small!

What is the good news for those made to look small?

Long before Jesus was born, the prophet Micah brought good news for the little town of Bethlehem in Judah:

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days...And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace. (Micah 5, 1ff)*

Many people have been made to feel small during the past year. Maybe you have, as well. By neighbours, by your boss, by illness... Every new day the sidings to which the old, slow, decommissioned carriages of the train have been consigned have to be extended. There they are, waiting for good luck to strike - marvelling at the InterCity Express trains, as they speed by.

And they have to generously applaud. The small and insignificant, the rejected, those who are beyond treatment, the slow, who cannot keep up with the rest. Those whose nakedness can't be hidden any longer. Micah's situation was much more dramatic. Israel had been "erased". For hundreds of years the country had been occupied by foreign rulers. In Jesus' time it was the occupying power of Rome; before that there were the Persians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians and, time and again, the Egyptians.

Depending on who had the better weapons, the bigger army in the region. Israel was located between great powers, who overran the country from south to north one moment and from north to south the next, destroying crops and villages and violating the women and children. Israel had been quite simply "erased".

All that remained was to blow the tiny particles of rubber off the paper.

A clean sweep had been made.

That is what the big and mighty do. That is the experience of the small and insignificant.

And that is the ground on which advent grows and Christmas glows. Christmas can only be understood if I stop playing the part of the strong man.

I can only understand the message of Christmas as someone who is needy.

The promise is meant for the small and insignificant. Good news for those who have been erased without trace, for those made to look small: a little child in a manger. Born in a small town.

Visited by small and insignificant people. Then, after one short night, on the run again. A little child.

The most vulnerable human form.

A human being at his most needy. The unexpected God.

A God, to whom you have to bend down in order to meet him. That is the answer for all those souls who have felt the pain of being kicked by heavy boots.

*"For see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people!"*

For all the people. That's new. All those poor and lowly little souls have a future. The big and important are already exhausted, even though they may still act like powerful rulers. That was Mary's message after she met the angel:

"He has lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things,..."

All those poor little souls have a future.

Don't give up. Don't exhaust yourself, trying to burn the candle at both ends. And, even more important: Don't underrate yourself!

That partnership you are living in, for all its adversities and disappointments: just appreciate it!

Your job, with all its inconveniences: be thankful for it. Your children, however they may develop: never stop loving them.

Your health, for all its frailties: value it! The country you are living in right now, your home: Do not say goodbye to it, even if something about it is not right for you, do not turn your back on it. Try to integrate into the society you are living in. Your church, for all its shortcomings and mistakes – remember how important it has been to you at certain moments in your life. And, first and foremost, remember that *that* church needs you!

The message of Christmas tells us that God's love has a very small beginning. **And** – the message of the Passion tells us that God's love ends in miserable circumstances. **But** – so the message of Easter tells us – God's love is revived in glory. **And** – so the message of Pentecost tells us – spreads, like an infectious form of healthiness.

In our advent and Christmas hymns we celebrate the small, the ingenuous, the innocent, the meek, the lowly.

Don't underrate yourself! Maybe, You, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, are one of the small clans. Maybe your love, o man! o woman!, is unimpressive and maybe your job performance is poor. Maybe your name will never make the headlines. And maybe your talents don't seem worth showing on TV, but:

Don't underrate yourself!

When you take the gospel of Christmas seriously, you discover that it is precisely in and around you yourself that something great is growing. God is growing in you, o Bethlehem. God is growing in you, o man and woman! Justice is growing in you! You don't have to dream on a small scale. All good things take time to grow. I have been a pastor for 30 years now and I have experienced both: crowded and empty churches, joy and frustration, success and my own failure, good times and very bad times relating to my job and my family.

Somehow I have always managed to start from scratch again and again, hoping for companionship along the way - and not always sure of my own plans and feelings.

All of us experience times when we think: Who am I? This is a completely natural question! It is always the VIPs, the very important people, the powerful ones, the loud ones who are in the limelight. We push a button and there they are - beaming out at us. But listen carefully. Listen, to the desperate plea that lies behind the façade of their TV shows: the plea that says: "Don't switch me off!"

You find the same desire in everyone:

Don't switch me off! Don't make me feel small.

The shepherds were terrified when the angels spoke to them. Mary was frightened. Joseph wanted to run away.

But, most of the time the very first words the angels said were: Do not be afraid!

God is growing in you, Bethlehem. God is growing in you, men and women!

Justice is growing in you!

You don't have to scale down your dreams. Allow them to grow. Look for friends. Appreciate relationships and community, they are invaluable.

Try to practise honesty, in small things and big. Let wings of justice grow. Offer hands and feet for peace: your hands and feet. Peace between you and your family and friends. Peace between you and the stranger.

Let justice be turned into action, why should it not be turned into surprising, subversive action, as practised by Karl-Bertil Jonsson at the Swedish Postal Service, transformed into a small-time Robin Hood.

Offering hands and feet for peace, so that heaven and earth might touch each other.

It did not happen in vain, back then in Bethlehem. It happened for us. We are worth the effort. We are worth the surprise: that God should make himself small for us. So, we no longer have reason to be afraid and say "No!", as God says to us, to you and to me: "I love you!" There is a passionate love-letter lying in that manger. The angels sing a passionate love-song. They are singing for you and for me.

God is saying: "I love you! Do not be afraid." Amen