

Christmas day 09 The Christmas Branch

Many years ago there was a mother with a large family. Her husband had died, leaving her a widow. She worked as hard as she could but she struggled to find enough money to pay for food and clothes and fuel for the fire. She and her children were often cold and sometimes hungry too.

The hardest time of year for them was Christmas, though. As the children walked through the village where they lived, every window they passed seemed to have a Christmas tree in it, decorated with beautiful ornaments and shining with candlelight. They would have loved to have a tree like that, but they knew it wasn't possible. Their mother would have loved to have given them a tree like that, but she knew it was out of reach too. It was coming up to Christmas time and, in the town where she lived, people were getting excited.

One year, on the night before Christmas Eve a storm blew up. All night long the children could hear it howling through the forests around the town. "At least it will bring down some wood that we can gather for the fire," said the children's mother. In the morning of Christmas Eve sure enough, when they went to look, the forest floor was covered in fallen branches. If they had nothing else for Christmas at least they'd be warm. As the widow gathered wood for the fire the children went off to see what they could find. Soon they were back, not with an armful of twigs, but with an entire branch which had fallen from a fir tree. "We will have a Christmas tree after all" they said. "It may be a bit battered – more of a Christmas branch than a Christmas tree - but it will do." They dragged the branch all the way home and into the house and propped it up in a corner of the room. They had nothing to put on it, but it made the house smell of pine, just like the proper Christmas trees in the rich people's houses, and they were happy with it.

But after they had gone to bed their mother sat in a chair by the fire and looked at fir branch. She was glad the children were pleased with it, but it was a bit pathetic really, compared to the trees in the other houses. It was lopsided and plain, with sparse branches. Suddenly she felt a wave of sadness sweep over her. She wanted to be able to give her children a tree like the other children in the town had, with shiny decorations on it, and candles to brighten it – even presents round its base, but there was no chance of that.

As she looked at the branch she noticed something moving in it. A spider crawled out and began to make its way to and fro across it, spinning a cobweb as it went. Back and forward, back and forward, the strands of the cobweb stretched across the branch.

It was the last straw. Wasn't it enough that she couldn't give her children a beautiful tree – now this spider had to come and spoil what she had with its web. She might have been poor, but she kept her house clean, and she wouldn't put up with cobwebs. "Even on Christmas Eve," she said to herself, "there's no rest,". She reached into her apron pocket for a cloth to sweep it away with and got up from her chair. But as she did so she heard a small voice, a tiny voice. It was coming from the spider.

"No, please don't!", it said.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't sweep you away, you and your untidy cobweb!" said the woman.

"But all I am doing is worshipping the Christ Child, just as my ancestors have always done."

"By leaving a mess all over our tree! How can that be worship?"

"If you sit down, and put the duster away, I'll tell you," said the spider.

So the woman sat down, and the spider started his story.

"Long ago," he said, "one of my distant ancestors lived in a place where there were hardly any trees. She lived in a cave by the side of a road going south from Bethlehem to Egypt in the middle of a stony desert. Now and then people came down the road. The spider took no notice of them, though, and they never noticed her either.

One day, though, she saw a tired looking couple – a young man and woman – trudging down the road towards her. The woman was carrying a tiny baby and both of them looked worried, glancing over their shoulders as they walked along.

As they came to the cave, the woman said to the man, "We've got to rest, Joseph – the baby needs to be fed, and we can't go any further tonight. Why don't we stop in that cave over there?"

"But Herod's soldiers are following us, Mary" answered the man "and if they catch us, we're finished, and so is Jesus!"

"That's as may be, his wife answered, "but I can't go on any longer, and it's almost dark."

So they decided that, dangerous though it was, they'd spend the night in the cave. Joseph said he'd stay awake and keep watch while Mary slept. But he was just as tired as she was, and soon his eyelids began to droop, and he fell asleep.

Now the spider was watching from a corner of the cave. She didn't know what had happened, but she could see that this little family was in danger, and she wondered what she could do to help. She couldn't fight off the soldiers they had talked about...

But then she had an idea. He went to the mouth of the cave and began to spin a web. Back and forth she went, across it, gradually building up strand upon strand of cobwebs until the mouth of the cave was covered.

She only just finished in time too. Because as She did, She saw two soldiers tramping down the road towards the cave, their weapons and armour shining in the moonlight.

They looked behind every rock, every scrubby shrub as they came.

"There's a cave up ahead there" one said to the other. "That would be a good place for them to hide."

"Yes, we'd better check that..."

They came closer and closer to the cave. The spider trembled with fear. Would her work be good enough.

"Nah! No one's been in here for years!" said the soldier. "Look at this cobweb – it's so thick you can't even see through it!"

And the soldiers went back to the road and marched off into the distance.

In the morning, Mary and Joseph woke up. "Look at the cobweb – there's been a very busy spider here", they said as they broke through it to get out. "And look – said Joseph, "there have been some busy soldiers too." All around the cave entrance they could see the footprints of the soldiers in the dust. "If it hadn't been for that spider's web, they would have found us for sure..."

"Well, thanks be to God for spiders!" said Mary. "I've often wondered what God created them for, but now I know – they have saved his son from death, and I'll never think of them the same way again. And God's blessing on them. Whenever they spin their webs they should tell the story of this night."

"And that," said the spider in the fir branch, to the widow, "is why, on Christmas Eve, all spiders spin their very best webs. We can't sing, we can't read from the Bible, but we can remember when we hid that tiny child from the soldiers, and so this is our worship.

"Well, then, you must spin away", said the woman to the spider, "for we all have to do what we can!"

And she thought to herself as she watched him spin. She often felt just like that spider – there was little she could do for her children, and yet she could do what she could – love them and look after them with God's help. For a while she watched as the spider carried on spinning his web but in the end, her eyelids felt heavy too, and she fell asleep in front of the fire.

She was woken next morning by the shouts of the children. "Look mother, look at our tree!"

And she looked, and every strand of that cobweb had turned to silver, and the tree shone as brightly as any they had ever seen. It was the very best tree that anyone had ever seen.

And that's the story behind the tinsel we put on our Christmas trees. I've brought a lot of this fine cobweb tinsel with me today, and I'd like to give each of you a few strands of it as you leave. Take it home and put it on your tree, or in your house somewhere as a reminder of that spider who protected the baby Jesus with his web, and a reminder that all of us can do something to help others, weaving love into their lives, even if it sometimes feels as fragile as a spider's silk. When we do that we are offering the kind of worship God really wants. It might not seem like much to us, but it might just make all the difference.

Amen