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Choirs and the joy of singing this Christmas – Bishop Marcus Stock

OUR ancient tradition of Christmas gift giving and receiving began with Wise Men seeing a star rising in the east and following it all the way to Bethlehem.

By Marcus Stock

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On their journey, they took with them three rare and precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, presents for a Child they found born in the poverty of a stable.

Now, in our time, despite the pandemic and prices back on the rise, there is a precious Christmas gift which can be delivered at a safe distance – and it's free! The gift of music is uplifting equally for the performer and the listener. Music can come alive on our lips, in our hearts, memories or imagination; it can even be experienced as a physical feeling by the hearing impaired.

In churches and chapels, it is no surprise that On Christmas night all Christians sing – but at this time of year, seasonal song, both sacred and secular, is everywhere. From doorstep carolling to choral performances, from festive playlists to Handel's Messiah, any of us might find ourselves joining in with whatever warms and enlivens our spirits at Christmas.

Lifting voices in song boosts a sense of community, gives expression to emotions and benefits our physical and mental health. As a child of seven with a stammer, I took myself off to sing in a church choir, losing the stammer and gaining a love of music and of the faith in God which inspired that music – a faith which would later inspire my vocation to the priesthood.

Singing is uniquely accessible. Lullabies, love songs and laments offer a range of individual and social benefits and bonding-opportunities, regardless of the quality of

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our voices. While no-one is there to judge us when we sing along to carols on the radio at home or in the car, even a trained chorister singing in public the solo verse of Once in Royal David's City can have a momentary crisis of confidence about hitting the high notes and maintaining a consistent pitch.

Self-confidence seems to be the key concept on popular TV talent shows. [Singers](#) are encouraged to 'step up' and 'own it', competing for what might be their only hope of future fame and wealth in the gift of three judges (not always men and, depending on your point of view, not always wise).

For just a brief period, with a wave of the TV-remote-control, Cinderellas appear transformed into self-confident celebrities, 'living the dream' as they strut their stuff centre stage. However, as the emotional and often tragic 'back-stories' of the winners sometimes reveal, 'self' confidence can evaporate in the darkest midnight hours.

Earthly stars can shine all-too-briefly, and for us mere mortals, trusting only in the trinity of 'me, myself and I' can leave us isolated with nowhere to turn when we encounter failure or suffer loss. The true meaning of 'confidence' is 'with faith'. For Christians, the God who makes dreams come true isn't a Fairy Godfather, waving a wand to grant wishes for beauty, talent, fame and fortune. The riches and gifts He gives are not easily-won, but are gained through patience and perseverance; His opportunities do not need to be seized or snatched, but are freely given through acts of kindness.

Cultural 'riches' are often regarded as luxuries, beyond the reach of those living with poverty, but studies show that simply singing together can improve children's teamwork and behaviour. In the Catholic schools and academies across the Diocese of Leeds, we address the single biggest factor that can prevent a child achieving its potential: poverty of opportunity. Our Diocesan Schools Singing Programme is recognised as the UK's leading choral music provision, with Leeds Cathedral music staff giving weekly whole-class professional singing tuition in schools. Whether just for enjoyment, as a pathway to learning organ, piano or accordion through our Keyboard Studies Programme, young people are following their dreams by finding their voice.

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We are now rolling out a National Schools Singing Programme, founded and supported by the Hamish Ogston Foundation, which is funding sustainable music education opportunities similar to ours right across the Catholic Church in the UK. By next Christmas, many more young voices will be raised in song and praise.

For all celebrating the birth of Christ, Christmas cannot and will never be cancelled. Whenever you use your free gift of song – out loud or in your heart, alone or with loved ones – do it with confidence and in gratitude for the source of all our gifts.

I wish you and all those you love a blessed, joyful and harmonious Christmas!



The Right Reverend Marcus Stock is Bishop of Leeds.