***‘What is a gift?’***

Two old friends met for a coffee and a grumble. Leo said that he felt like a child who’s been told to go and sit on the naughty step. He and his wife had offered to help with the church’s Christmas Day lunch and Jacob, their chief steward, told him he had a team who knew exactly how to run the event and he didn’t need any hangers-on barging in.

His friend Bruce sympathised. ‘I must admit I keep out of Jacob’s way when I’m on door duty.’

Leo was fuming. ‘I get it that Jacob’s accustomed to running everything but tact isn’t his strong point, is it? Didn’t I hear he raved at your Sally for breaking a cup last Sunday? And didn’t apologise, even though someone else owned up to having done it?’

Bruce said, ‘She had a little weep about that on the way home. My dear wife may lack confidence, but she more than pulls her weight in church, doing the flower arrangements and helping with the coffee mornings.’

Leo said, ‘Time for a change. We all work hard for the church throughout the year and get no thanks for it. Well, we don’t do it to be thanked, I know, but . . . look, neither of us has family around this year, so why don’t we all go away to a hotel for Christmas?’

When Bruce told Sally, she clapped her hands in delight. ‘Oh, what a treat! To be looked after for a change! It would be wonderful.’

And, thought Bruce, there’d be no Jacob to find fault with her.

She pirouetted. ‘Shall I buy a new dress for the occasion? I did promise to help decorate the church for Christmas, but I can do that before we go.’

Leo told his wife Dora what he’d suggested, but her response was muted.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I’ve heard of people going to a hotel for Christmas, and I know our family are not around this year but I’m not sure about going away.’

Leo said, ‘Christmas doesn’t happen only in our church and neighbourhood. Come to think of it, Mary and Joseph were far from their home when Jesus was born.’

‘I agree that Christmas is for everyone, everywhere. All right. Where shall we go?’

They had such fun researching hotels both near and far for Christmas packages. Dora and Sally bought sparkly outfits and new shoes, while the two men were persuaded to buy new waistcoats for the event.

A fortnight before Christmas Jacob fell and broke his leg. Their minister gave out a notice in church saying that as Jacob would not be around, they’d have to cancel the Christmas Day lunch.

Bruce reflected that Mary and Joseph’s plans for the birth of the baby had also been disrupted when they were summoned to Bethlehem for the census, with no excuses accepted.

But after the service, Bruce took his friends aside and said, ‘There are twenty-eight older people who have no family nearby and nowhere else to go that day. Some need transport to get to the church.’

Sally sighed. ‘So, do you think the hotel will refund our booking fee? We can’t go off and enjoy ourselves while other people are sitting at home looking at a plate of cold baked beans, with only the television for company. But if I spill gravy on my beautiful new dress, I shall make you pay for the dry cleaning, so there!’

Dora brought out a pad and pencil. ‘I’ll contact the people who usually help Jacob and see how many will still do it. Do you know if the turkey’s been ordered? Or, we can get everything from the supermarket, veg already prepared, that sort of thing.’

Leo said, ‘I’ll organise transport to get people to and from church.’

Bruce agreed. ‘If Dora will run the kitchen, I’ll carve and we’ll all serve and clear away.’

Sally said, ‘I’ll decorate the hall, lay the tables, provide crackers and a tiny gift for everyone. Perhaps our old organist would come to play some carols for people to sing along with?’

Dora grimaced. ‘Just so long as nobody expects me to wear a hat from a cracker. I draw the line at that!’

Christmas Day. In the evening.

When all the guests had finally departed and the washing up had been done, the four friends, still in their Christmas finery, adjourned for a coffee and a collapse.

Leo leaned back in his chair, exhausted. He said, ‘It went well, didn’t it? One or two of them even thanked us.’

Bruce flourished a piece of paper. ‘To keep us from getting big-headed, here’s a list of complaints. *Why* *weren’t there any Yorkshire puddings? My friend got twice as much stuffing as I did. There weren’t any sixpences in the Christmas pudding.*

Dora eased off her shoes. ‘They loved the singing.’

Leo said, ‘Would we do it again?’

Sally nodded. ‘Gifts are paid for in different ways, not just in cash. We paid in time and trouble. If we run the event again next year, I’ll do the decorations all in gold.’