'Christmas' by Sir John Betjeman

The bells of waiting Advent ring,

The Tortoise stove is lit again

And lamp-oil light across the night

Has caught the streaks of winter rain

In many a stained-glass window sheen

From Crimson Lake to Hooker's Green.

The holly in the windy hedge

And round the Manor House the yew

Will soon be stripped to deck the ledge,

 The altar, font and arch and pew,

So that villagers can say

'The church looks nice' on Christmas Day.

Provincial public houses blaze

And Corporation tramcars clang,

On lighted tenements I gaze

Where paper decorations hang,

And bunting in the red Town Hall

Says 'Merry Christmas to you all.'

And London shops on Christmas Eve

Are strung with silver bells and flowers

As hurrying clerks the City leave

To pigeon-haunted classic towers,

And marbled clouds go scudding by

The many-steepled London sky.

And girls in slacks remember Dad,

And oafish louts remember Mum,

And sleepless children's hearts are glad,

And Christmas-morning bells say 'Come!'

Even to shining ones who dwell

Safe in the Dorchester Hotel.

And is it true? And is it true.

This most tremendous tale of all,

Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,

A Baby in an ox's stall?

The Maker of the stars and sea

Become a Child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is,

No loving fingers tying strings

Around those tissued fripperies,

The sweet and silly Christmas things,

Bath salts and inexpensive scent

And hideous tie so kindly meant,

No love that in a family dwells,

No carolling in the frosty air,

Nor all the steeple-shaking bells

Can with this simple truth compare –

That God was Man in Palestine

And lives today in Bread and Wine.

Discussion questions

1. How can we tell that this poem was written in the 1950s? How has the Advent season changed during the years since then?
2. What pictures do the first five verses paint of Christmas preparations?
3. Sir John Betjeman was a practising Christian, and the final three verses pose a question about the real meaning of Christmas. What do you think he is trying to make us think about by his question, which is repeated three times?