

Putting Christ Back Into Christmas

Having received a number of complimentary remarks about my recent Halloween insert - thank you - it seemed timely to try to also write something on the subject of Christmas, not to be a Scrooge but just to help us to focus on the real purpose and spirit of the celebration.

Advent: A Time of *Waiting*

In the midst of all the typical pre-Christmas mayhem which, try as we might, we won't be able to avoid, Advent provides us with a few weeks grace to put the genie back in the bottle, the credit card back in the wallet, and to step back from the brink and think. It also calls us to a time of very necessary spiritual preparation in order to remind ourselves that, as Christians, *we* don't celebrate the birth until the baby is born.

The word Advent comes from the Latin *advenire*, meaning 'to come to'. As our Advent wreath and calendar¹ are designed to remind us, step by step we move from the darkness of anticipation toward the light of revelation. If the event is worth waiting for, then let's wait. It's bad enough that the High Street has been doing its version of Christmas possibly since as early as September, and that some of our neighbours' houses will be decorated weeks ahead of Christmas. But this is *our* feast and it doesn't begin until December 25th and it continues until the Epiphany, don't forget, so don't be fooled by those who start taking down their decorations the minute they get back from the pub on Boxing Day!

We have four weeks of Advent in which to prepare for the coming of Christ. It's our feast and we should prepare for it in our own way – not the Christmas shopping, not writing cards, not baking cakes (though we may have all of that to do as well), but very deliberately making the spiritual journey from darkness to light, taking the time and making the time for that journey, counting down the days and making them count – spiritually. That's the invitation from the church when we begin our Advent season.

It's one of the reasons why I personally won't get involved in "Carol Services". By definition Christmas carols are songs of praise and joy celebrating the birth of Christ. On two counts, therefore, we shouldn't be singing them before Christmas: firstly because the Church teaches that Advent is a penitential season, not one of praise and joy, hence purple vestments are worn throughout, and, secondly, because

¹ And, again, especially when bought for children to use, they should be religious themed – usually a manger scene – the windows of which gradually reveal components of the Christmas story. Secular themed so-called "Advent" calendars revealing chocolates or the like behind each window do nothing to teach what Advent and Christmas are about; all they do is to teach children to look forward to more of the same in their Christmas presents.

Christ isn't born yet and so Christmas carols are totally inappropriate during Advent.

If we join the world around us in celebrating aspects of Christmas while it's still only Advent, then we lose the whole spiritual purpose of the season and by the time our proper celebrations begin on Christmas Day we can already be suffering from "Christmas fatigue". We can't afford to allow our celebration to be compromised by what everyone else considers Christmas to be all about, or, to put it another way, if we don't fight our spiritual corner, then who is going to? We don't celebrate the birth until the baby is born.

We simply need to be patient and disciplined. It's not as if, if we don't jump on the bandwagon, we're going to miss anything. Christmas, the *real* Christmas, won't start without us and *our* journey getting there must first include Advent - a time of waiting, a time of anticipation.

Reclaiming the Feast

How we "traditionally" celebrate Christmas, in the non-spiritual sense, is actually a very short tradition with many of the things we associate with Christmas being either pagan in origin² or the fruit of a Victorian idealised Christmas that embraced certain traditional elements as well as others that were developments of their own time.

It was Prince Albert, for example, who in 1841 first introduced the German custom of the Christmas tree to this country.³ The first Christmas card wasn't produced until 1843. And it was the Victorians who revived the medieval custom of carolling.

The origins of Santa Claus can be traced to the gift-giving 4th century bishop from modern-day Turkey, St Nicholas, patron saint of children and seafarers (feast day 6 December). In Holland he was known as "Sinter Klaas" and became associated with gift-giving at Christmas, a tradition and image that Dutch immigrants then took to the United States where the name Santa Claus developed. It was an 1823 illustration of the Santa Claus figure in the poem *The Night Before Christmas* that has become our traditional image.⁴ In 1843, Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, a book that immortalised the Victorian Christmas – including the jolly,

² "Yule" was the name given to the pagan winter solstice and meant "wheel" – the pagan symbol for the sun. Yule logs were burned in honour of the sun. Mistletoe was considered a sacred plant and kissing underneath mistletoe was a fertility ritual. Holly berries were thought to be a food of the gods. [see: www.the-north-pole.com/history/]

³ The custom started in the Baltic countries and northern Germany. The first documented use of an evergreen tree at Christmas was in Latvia in 1510. [ditto]

⁴ The names of Santa's reindeer were first listed by the poem's author, Clement Clark Moore. Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer was an advertising creation of the American catalogue company Montgomery Ward as recently as 1939. [ditto]

larger-than-life Dickensian “Spirit of Christmas Present” we call Father Christmas. One source⁵ suggests that most images prior to about 1880 showed Fr Christmas with a green coat and that red only became popular after Coca-Cola introduced it in their advertisements in America in the 1930s.⁶

If, therefore, so much of our so-called traditional Christmas is only around 170 years old, how was it celebrated before that? One might assume that at one time it was purely a Christian feast kept by the Christian Church and yet over the centuries it has clearly also become a secular celebration and never more obviously so than in our own day and age. Our Christian feast has effectively been hijacked - how can we rescue it? How can we put Christ back into Christmas before we lose our grasp on it completely?

The commercialisation of Christmas has almost completely overwhelmed even the remotest connection there might once have been with what the feast is actually all about, and the process seems to begin earlier every year. One well-known London department store takes great pride in being the first to put its Christmas wares on sale⁷, a pride that has nothing to do with Christmas but with cornering the market before anyone else. Not to be too outdone, everyone else is soon climbing on board.

We then have the growing practice (imported from America) of decorating the exterior of houses and gardens in a vast and often extremely tacky illuminated effort to out-do the neighbours, an effort that switches on as early as November. What does this have to do with Christmas, the *real* Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Christ? Not a lot – in fact nothing at all. Just look at the decorations: Santa Clauses, reindeers, snowmen, holly, and all those lights – but is there a manger or anything religious anywhere to be seen? Usually not, and it’s the same with town and city-centre Christmas lights.

And a walk through any card shop will leave you struggling to find a Christmas card design that’s even remotely religious (they are more often found in the charity shops). It’s all to do with political correctness of course – we aren’t allowed to offend those who don’t believe in Christ by reminding them that Christmas is actually a Christian celebration! But then why would anyone want to buy a Christmas card who doesn’t believe in Christ and therefore what is the point of producing Christmas cards without a religious theme? I’m reminded of when I was working in Saudi. If you knew where to shop you could find “Christmas” cards but they all they said, very simply and blandly, was “Happy Holidays” and were purely

⁵ *Steve Wright’s Book of Factoids* (HarperCollins).

⁶ In a late 1800s issue of *Harper’s* magazine, the illustrator Thomas Nast depicted the rotund Santa and added such details as Santa’s workshop located at the North Pole and the idea of a list of good and bad children. [ditto]

⁷ Sometime in early summer if memory serves.

secular in design. Under the circumstances, being in a conservative Muslim country, I could accept that, but not here.

Buying and sending religious-theme cards only is just the first of many steps we can take in the process of reclaiming the feast, putting Christ back into Christmas. Not only would we be supporting the manufacturers who have the courage to produce such cards but, more importantly, we would be bearing witness to our faith to those who receive cards from us. What we would be saying is: this is what Christmas is really all about and we are not going to apologise for it.

And, yes, of course we should celebrate Christmas in other than religious ways, but what aspects of society's "Christmas" are appropriate and which are not? The bottom line for us as Christians is that it's the celebration of the birth of Christ, and our priority should be the spiritual aspects of the feast and of the Christmas season, which, again, doesn't begin until December 25th and continues until the Epiphany. We are not being Scrooges, we are being witnesses to Christ - which is our call from our baptism.

So then, in what other ways can we try to put Christ back into Christmas? Food for thought and prayer.

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As we hopefully try to defend our spiritual principles and priorities to the people and society around us, we also need to somehow communicate them to our children because ours is small voice among many much louder voices that convey often very different and quite contrary messages to them. It's a little like the Jewish "Family Seder" meal celebrated at Passover. The ritual allows for the youngest child in the family to keep asking: "Why is this night different? What is the meaning of what we are doing?" And, in answer, the accompanying scripture readings and lessons tell the story of Passover commemorated in the meal. It should be the same with ourselves and Christmas. Our children may not always ask the question directly but we have got to give the answer, teach the lesson, and ensure that the right message – the *Christian* message – is being conveyed and learned, otherwise there is a danger that it will be lost to them for ever. "Why is Christmas night different? What is the meaning of what we are doing?" What is our answer and what are we doing to defend, support and promote that reality for them?

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