

## Christmas Day, 9.30am and 11am 2017

Those of you who were here this time yesterday – top marks, by the way, well done – might remember that I started by talking about Oliver Cromwell – the man who banned Christmas. It is one of the reasons why England has never tried republicanism again. The last time was dour and miserable. No carols, no mince pies, no wine, no presents– no wonder, after a few years, England said no Republic. Bring back the King, and let the English Christmas be merry once more.

Now, interestingly, Cromwell's Christmas ban wasn't just on what you might call the secular side of Christmas. He wasn't an early version of those voices you hear today, rightly complaining that the true meaning of Christmas has been lost under all the commercialism and frivolity. He wasn't saying that all the parties and dancing got in the way of people coming to church, and that's why they had to stop.

No, Cromwell and Co. were clear that Christmas itself was the problem. Oh yes, they frowned at the drink and the singing and all the rest of it – but the real problem was this, what *we're* doing now, celebrating the birth of Jesus. And of course, this was not because they were early members of the British Humanist Association, or worried about offending Muslims. No, Cromwell's crew were hard-core Christians. Most of the time, these men could not get enough of church. A good long sermon was their idea of a great time. Just not on December 25<sup>th</sup> thank you, and not celebrating the birth of Jesus.

Which is why, in Parliament controlled London on Christmas Day 1643, many of the churches were closed and most of the shops were open, while the House of Commons continued to sit. It was, after all, just another day. In 1644, December 25<sup>th</sup> was special, but only because Londoners were commanded to fast and pray for the success of Parliament's armies. In 1645, Parliament published its replacement for the Book of Common Prayer – and in it, you'd find no mention of Christmas whatsoever. Christmas had gone. And if Cromwell's Republic had endured, it might never have come back.

Why did Christians ban Christmas?

At the risk of massive over-simplification, it's about two different views of the Christian religion.

One view, Cromwell's view, is that Christianity is all about Good Friday. What you really, really need to know is that Jesus died for your sins. That you deserved to be punished by God, but praise be, Jesus took it for you, and because of that you can live forever. Anything else is a distraction. Baby worship is a distraction. It needs to be swept away, banned, persecuted if necessary. You are a sinner, saved by the Cross – and that is all you need to know.

The other view also takes the death – and the resurrection – of Jesus seriously. You'll note that what we do on Christmas morning is what we do every Sunday: we take bread and wine and we tell the story of the cross and Easter. Every Eucharist is a Cross and Resurrection feast. *But* it sets Cross and Resurrection inside an even bigger picture:

A picture of a world so loved by God that He was not content just to pluck a few sinners from it.

A picture of God coming into that world, and starting to fill it with light and love and healing.

A picture of the world beginning to be made anew, of glory streaming into it, of Heaven overtaking it, of the whole creation throbbing and pulsing with love, given a new destiny of perfect joy.

If you're a Christian, says this Gospel, yes - you are a forgiven sinner, saved by the Cross. That's true, and that's wonderful.

But still *more* wonderful is that you are part of this world into which divine life has rushed. Divine life has rushed in, in this baby, and it is searching out and filling all the dark and secret places of the race. Grace is rising all around us, God is all around us – not just in the church, not just in those beating their breasts and saying how dreadful they are – *all* around us. And God is at work to bring the whole world to healing, to joy, to peace, to glory. Because of Christmas, all things are surging with grace. That's why the Angels sing Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace and goodwill to all; and that's why – despite miserable old Cromwell - we're quite right to join their song. A very happy Christmas to you all.

*PW*