

Bedmond Christmas Eve 2016

Let me read you something from a Church 'Liturgy Training Manual' – yes, I know, not the kind of publication you'd usually find me getting enthusiastic about! But I think it puts clearly and well something that deserves our serious thought and reflection ;-

Christmas celebrates the Incarnation, not just the Nativity. The Incarnation is the ongoing process of salvation, while the Nativity is a once-for-all historical event in Bethlehem. We do not really celebrate Christ's birthday, remembering something that happened long ago. We celebrate the stupendous fact of the Incarnation, God's entry into this world so thoroughly that nothing has been the same since. And God continues to take flesh in our midst, in men, woman and children who form his body today. And the birth we celebrate is not just the past historical event but Christ's continuing birth in his members.

I've always thought we can quite seriously miss the point of what Christmas is really all about if we overdo the constant re-enactment of the birth in the stable, and especially if we insist on doing it in a *childish* rather than a *childlike* fashion – and there is an important difference between the two. Because Christmas is not just about the Nativity, it's about the Incarnation – God himself, ultimate Creator and Sustainer of the entire Universe and whatever other parallel universes there might or might not be, the Immortal Deity taking on and living out mortal humanity, becoming one of us, living with all the limitations and handicaps we mortals have to face and then dying just as we mortals have to despite the fact that God is, by definition, immortal. "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the Incarnate Deity" we sing; The Word was with God and the Word was God; and the Word became flesh and lived amongst us" we read. It's not childish at all.

The poet Steve Turner put it, sardonically, this way –

Christmas is really
for the children.
Especially for children
who like animals, stables,
stars and babies wrapped
in swaddling clothes.

Then there are wise men,
kings in fine robes,
humble shepherds and a
hint of rich perfume.

Easter is not really
for the children
unless accompanied by
a cream filled egg.
It has whips, blood, nails,
a spear and allegations
of body snatching.
It involves politics, God
and the sins of the world.
It is not good for people
of a nervous disposition.
They would do better to
think on rabbits, chickens
and the first snowdrop
of spring.

Or they'd do better to
wait for a re-run of
Christmas without asking
too many questions about
what Jesus did when he grew up
or whether there's any connection.

I'm also with that Liturgy Training Manual when it reflects on the idea that God somehow continues to be incarnate by living through the actions and attitudes he puts into us when we let him, when we allow ourselves to be open to his becoming part of us through worship, through prayer, through Bible Study, through fellowship with others who are trying to do the same – and I might add, not necessarily themselves sharing the same belief and understanding about God that we hold.

So far, so good.

Where I find myself wanting to differ, however, is when the Manual states something I hear stated quite often in our consideration of the

effects of the Incarnation and the life and teachings of Jesus – “God entering our world so thoroughly that ***nothing has been the same since***”

We do like to think that since Jesus Christ came into the world, the world has been a changed place, and, of course, changed for the better. But is it really?

I think of those dreadful images of the situation in Syria, especially in Aleppo; of the thousands who have died there or in the Yemen or in Iraq, Afghanistan or wherever, or blinded, crippled, orphaned - all because people cannot live with other people who see things differently or because we can think of no other way of solving differences except by going to war; I think of those Christians in Egypt killed or injured just a couple of weeks ago as they worshipped in their Church when someone who opposed their way of doing things exploded a bomb in the section where women and children sit; I think of the sexual and mental abuse of children over many years in football training or in residential homes for those whose own home background, ironically, was not considered suitable for them; I think of lorries being deliberately driven into crowds of happy people enjoying themselves.

Has the world really changed for the better since the coming of Christ 2000 years ago? We sang earlier “Beneath the angel strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong – and man, at war with man, hears not the love song that they bring”. Only three days ago Prince Charles, doing Thought for the Day on Radio 4, reflecting on similarities between the way of thinking of some leading people today and the attitudes that lay behind the Holocaust of the 1940’s said “That such things are still going on is beyond belief”.

Here’s how the poet Henry Longfellow, witnessing the horrors of the America Civil War, put it more than 150 years ago:-

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,

and wild and sweet the words repeat

of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom

had rolled along the unbroken song
of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,

a voice, a chime, a chant sublime
of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,

and with the sound the carols drowned
of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent the hearth-stones of a continent,

and made forlorn the households born
of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;

"For hate is strong, and mocks the song
of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;

The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail,
with peace on earth, good-will to men."

Has nothing really changed in those 2000 years?

Well, yes, you'll be pleased to hear me say. Because in all those dreadful examples of man's inhumanity to man, in every case, there emerge people who show extraordinary acts of kindness, of self-sacrifice, of peace and goodwill, of love and compassion, often in the

face of severe persecution and despite the enormous danger they put themselves in as they do so. That's the heritage of the Christmas message. These effects of Christ's teachings have been out of all proportion to their humble origins – a peasant carpenter from an obscure village in an unimportant vassal state of the Roman Empire.

Oh yes, I know that far from all those acts of kindness and goodwill have been carried out by Christians or by people who have taken to heart the Christmas message; of course not. But it is part of the legacy of 2000 years of the Christian story that so much of that goodwill has stemmed from such a lowly source as a child in a stable in Bethlehem. That's something I have to be reminded of from time to time. Like many others I have what might be described as a somewhat jaundiced approach to the long, long period of so-called Christmas festivities that bring me close to adopting a Scrooge-like attitude towards the sheer humbug nature of it all. I need reminding that behind all the holly and tinsel, the winter lights on the houses and the singing of carols from mid-November onwards, the remorseless commercialism of it all, the inescapable materialism – what is being communicated in so many different ways is the Christian message of peace and goodwill, of kindness and care, a message which would hardly be put across in such a compelling way were there to be just a lightened up winter but no Christmas.

So however much or however little of the essential message of the Incarnation you find yourself able to accept, let's at least all rejoice together and bask in the spirit of goodwill that Christmas puts into the hearts of so many people of all outlooks and persuasions.

So, in the words of a song which is not one of our Christian Christmas carols, have yourselves a Very Merry Christmas Day.