

“BAH! HUMBUG! THE MYTH OF CHRISTMAS”

Matthew 1:18-25

Those of you who saw the short video that Karl and his friends had made for the outreach event a couple of weeks ago may well remember some of the comments that were made by people in the streets of Lichfield when asked what Christmas meant to them. One of the ones that sticks on my mind was from a girl who ended what she had to say with the words, *“But I don't believe in all that Jesus stuff, though.”* She wasn't the only one to say something like that – but the rest ended up (as they say) on the cutting room floor.

For many people, Christmas really is just a myth: it has little or no basis in truth. And over the generations, a sense of nostalgia and an increasing scepticism have strangely conspired to empty Christmas of any real content. When we look at what has grown up around the festival, we see that there's a fair bit of justification for not wanting to believe it all. Many of the myths of Christmas are very easily dispelled. And we have the good old Victorians to thank for much of the mythical smokescreen that has grown up around it. There is, of course, the date of Christmas. The birth of Jesus certainly did not occur on 25th December in the year zero. Most of the evidence points to a date in the spring, and due to an elementary mistake by a sixth century monk called Dionysius Exiguus when he was creating a calendar, it's most likely that Jesus was born in about 6BC.

Other ideas that depart somewhat from the truth of it all are the three kings (there's no evidence that there were three – not even in the Bible) and the depiction of Jesus as a quiet and well-tempered baby in a spotless stable, with scrubbed and smiling domestic animals offering him the kind of worship you don't even see in churches. That's got all mixed up with Santa Claus, and Christmas trees (whose origins were pagan, not Christian), and fairies, and other legends and tales. It's small wonder that many people look at Christmas and see so much stuff tacked on that throw out the whole lot as a myth.

But it's a jolly good time of year for a holiday, nonetheless, so there has to be something behind it. Having dispelled some of the myths and unfortunately thrown the baby out with the bathwater, we seek some justification for the great bazaar of commercialism and self-indulgence that is the modern western Christmas. Well, let's assume that there's a nugget of truth somewhere in the story and use that as the basis for a whole new set of myths. Many would consider the birth of Jesus (if they actually make any connection between that and the festival we now call Christmas) as a kind of timeless tale that gives an example, an inspiration to humankind for a better way of living. And Christmas now ends up as a time to think about all those worthy things that we feel should have some emphasis at some time or other, just so we don't forget them altogether.

And again, those people who were interviewed for the video said all the right things, really. Christmas is a time for peace, although actually it boils down to nothing more than a brief pause in hostilities, a couple of days off for soldiers and terrorists alike. It's a time for the family, for seeing people that you have skilfully managed to avoid for the rest of the year and saying a lot of insincere rubbish to them until the booze kicks in and the truth comes out. Surveys tell us that there is more family strife and marital breakdown at Christmas than at any other time of the year. It's a time for festivity and fun, which seems a good idea until you look at the statistics for deaths caused by drunken drivers, and the numbers of serious crimes that are committed. Well surely we'd agree that it's an occasion for charity and for giving. Charities may well benefit from sales of Christmas cards and collections by carol singers, but just stop and think how much more there would be to give to charity without the orgy of spending and borrowing that underpins the festival. Back in 1988, Stephen Fry wrote this in an article in *The Listener*:

“Christmas is a time for saying that Christmas is a time for doing things that one should, frankly, be doing anyway. 'Christmas is a time for considering people less fortunate than ourselves.' Oh, and July and April aren't, is that it? 'Christmas is a time for forgiveness.' We should be vindictive and beastly for the rest of the year, then? 'Christmas is a time for peace on earth and good will towards men.' Let us therefore for goodness' sake concentrate during the rest of the year on bellicose malevolence.”

But then, of course, there's the children. Jesus, the tiny baby of a billion ghastly Christmas cards. All those children who were killed by nasty old Herod. The looks on their little faces as they mark the birth of the Prince of Peace by unwrapping their Inter-Galactic Genocidal Death Blast weapons (batteries not included) and their anatomically unfeasible plastic role models with wardrobes that would bankrupt small countries. Sweet little grandchildren who use up an entire year's stock of good behaviour in a couple of hours at grandma's. Of course it's about children – in whose freckled faces our hopes for the future and our nostalgia for the past combine in sherry-fuelled soft-focus. The American social commentator and satirist P J O'Rourke once wrote: *“It's customarily said that Christmas is done 'for the kids'. Considering how awful Christmas is and how little our society likes children, this must be true.”* (Of course, looking at it from another perspective, you may be able to identify with young Nigel Molesworth, the “goriller of 3B” in *Back in the Jug Agane* p397.)

It's all a myth, though: all of these layers that we have plastered over Christmas to try and assuage our own guilt and convince ourselves that there is some point to it all – without actually looking at what the real point of it is. Those of you who have been here for more than a couple of years will probably be able to recite this poem off by heart as I read it, because I refer to it so often, but listen to it anyway one more time. (*Christmas Is Really For The Children* by Steve Turner.) Christmas is a deeply spiritual and inescapably important time for all humanity. Stephen Fry (in the article from which I quoted earlier) writes:

“Part of the problem, of course, is that spirituality keeps creeping into the festivities. Indeed, it seems to be getting more and more religious every year. One yearns for a return to commercialism, to put a bit of materialism back into the season.”

But it's not a question of spirituality *“creeping into the festivities.”* Over the centuries, the spirituality has leached out of Christmas and been replaced with festivities and the myths we've already considered. Now – don't get me wrong – Christmas is a cause for celebration and I, for one, would make a heck of a fuss if any modern day Puritan proposed to do away with the annual remembrance of the birth of Jesus. But it can only be a real celebration if we recognise what the truth behind it really is. At the heart of Christmas is a spiritual and historical truth – not a myth cunningly constructed by the manufacturers of children's toys and overpriced provisions in fancy packaging, or by the peddlers of politically correct, religionless, pop philosophy.

And that spiritual truth concerns Jesus – a real, historical, non-mythical person – and his mission. We've just read part of the Christmas story from Matthew's gospel. We'll hear it more than once between now and Christmas Day. Joseph, betrothed to Mary, is told by God that the unexpected baby that Mary is now carrying is to be born with a specific purpose. It is not to be a model for Christmas card pictures and plastic Nativity sets. It is not to be the justification for an annual global knees up, nor for schisms and wars of unalloyed bigotry. Nor, believe it or not, is it to be the subject of countless choruses and carols, pictures and paintings, stories and films. The child is to be born with one purpose, a purpose reflected in the name that Joseph is to give him – Joshua, Yeshua, Jesus: *“because he will save his people from their sins.”*

Jesus means *“God saves”*. All down through the centuries leading up to his birth, Jesus had been foretold by the prophets as someone who would come and bring salvation. Men and women, boys and girls would know release and liberty from the things that ruined their lives, that made them less than the people God intended them to be – oppression, disease, hatred, poverty, disaster. And what is at the very root of all that – sin, alienation from God. Jesus was to be born into that world of trouble and travail, born to provide a way of escape for those who chose to take it. He was to be the Saviour of all mankind. That, in the words of trite little slogan that appears at this time of year, is the *“reason for the season”*. (Where would we Christians be without words that rhyme, eh?)

And this is all at God's own initiative. He had made all the promises. He had repeated his covenant with humankind again and again. He sent Jesus into the world. He wanted, desperately wanted, to reconcile fallen humanity – you and me – to himself, to enjoy our relationship as he originally meant it to be. So we find that Jesus is also referred to as *“Immanuel – God with us.”* God came into our world in the form of that

tiny, vulnerable baby, born in a smelly cowshed round the back of a pub. He knew that we could never get to him to sort things out on our own, however much we wanted to, however much we tried. So he had to come to us, to live his life amongst us, not to call us out of the hassles and sins of this life, but to lead us out; to grasp us by the hand and help us towards heaven.

That is an awesome reason to celebrate Christmas. That's why I said I would never want to stop celebrating it. It's not about family, unless it's about our rejoining God's family. It's not about giving, unless it's about God giving his only Son as the greatest gift that could ever be given or received. It's not about peace, unless it's about knowing God's perfect peace, his shalom, from all the burdens and difficulties that fill our lives. It's not about charity, unless it's about the awesome, infinite, incomprehensible love of God towards his creation. It's not about children, unless it's about the child in the Bethlehem feeding trough who grew to become a man and who gave his life – totally and freely – so that you and I could become adopted children of God.

And just so we don't forget that in the weeks and months between Christmases, God has provided plenty of things to help us remember. His word, the Bible: our fellowship and worship together. And the bread and this wine which we use so regularly in communion. This is no myth, no baseless legend. We take the bread to remind ourselves that it was a real, tangible body that grew up to be nailed to the cross: that, as Paul wrote to the Christians in Colosse, *“God has reconciled you by Christ's physical body” (Colossians 1:22)*. We take the wine to recall that the baby was born in blood and gore and that the blood which coursed through his veins was splashed out over the cross to seal God's promises to his people – *“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace” (Ephesians 1:7)*. *“He will save his people from their sins.”* Rejoice - he's your Jesus, your Saviour!