

Christmas is for Grown-Up's

Introduction

Very insulting when people say that Christmas is just for the kids.

Don't get me wrong - I am sympathetic. They are trying to allay their own disappointment. Years of waiting for Fatehr Christmas and the latest train set left them thinking that what was it was about, and now that they don't believe in Santa, and the train set no longer brings joy - well, there's nothing in it for them.

But as a Christian, Christmas is not about Santa or the presents, its about Jesus, and its a pretty important thing to my faith, that Jesus was born, and lived and died. And remembering his birth is a big deal. So saying - its for the kids - is saying that my belief system, and the things that I have built my life on, well - its just childish.

Now I know how it must feel when people say that football is just a game and its a shame to see grown ups kicking a ball around and getting paid for it to make a living.

In the bleak midwinter.

Myth busting

So the trouble is that we've made Christmas a bit of a fairy story - where the truth plays second fiddle to the romantic image. I'm sorry Ms Rosseti - yours is my favourite all time carol, but It was not snowing, snow on snow, and it was very likely not winter either.

The Bible of course gives us little to go on - barely 20 verses, and its not even mentioned by 2 of the gospel writers. Or to put it another way, Jesus birth was so minor compared to the rest of his life and what the faith is about, that the other 25 books of the new testament don't mention it.

I say it was more likely summer, because if the Romans did a census and needed people to travel, they wouldn't do it in winter. And spring was sowing crops and autumn was harvesting - so it was probably summer.

We all know by now that it wasn't a German design, wooden cattle shed either. People kept their animals in cave like dwellings - and they would sleep above on a shelf round the top and the heat from the animals would rise up. There was no room above, so the holy family had to keep down in with the animals. Quite horrible.

And if you look at Herod's instructions about the slaughter of the innocents - all infants under the age of 2 - it would seem to suggest that Mary and Joseph stayed in Bethlehem for many months after the birth, and most likely had moved to a relatives house by the time the maji - undetermined number or gender - arrived. Sorry - not 3 men in a barn.

Yet - the reality is so stark, brutal, risky - that we don't dare share it.

1 in 10 children died in childbirth in Jesus time. Half of Roman subjects died before the age of 5. If God is coming as human - did he have a back up plan?

And one day I really must do some thinking about the slaughter of all those babies by Herod - and what that means. Jesus birth caused hundreds of mothers to lose their children - the saviour has come - but at what cost?

Lets face it, most of what passes for Christmas these days, is actually just distracting us from fear or pain or suffering - not shining a light on it and saying - where is God in this?

Poem - From John Bell - there is a place for little children

2 Corinthians 5:19

that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ
God came into our world. Came as one of us. Wet his nappy, cut his finger.
Had family meals, friends, learnt stuff, forgot stuff.
This Jesus - who we hear saying such amazing things
Who makes such amazing claims - I am the light of the world
Who heals people with a touch or a word

He was a baby - like everyone of us was.
Helpless. Powerless.

There are many paradoxes in the faith, someone said that's how you know you're getting close to the truth - when you're really holding two opposites together.

How can God be human? I mean, surely he is just pretending?
Like Clark Kent pretending to be a journalist, when really he's superman.

Jesus pretended to be human, but all along he knew he was God,
knew what the plan was, pretended to suffer.

Yet if that is true, then in what sense did Jesus die for us, or take away our sins?

Yet if he is only human - then how did he control the weather, or do the things he did?

The early church wrestled with these things for 300 years

(I don't think it was the only thing they were wrestling with - they were being burnt alive by Emperor Nero and there was all sort so other issues - so don't be hard on them that it took them a while to figure it out).

Some - like the gnostics - said Jesus contained a divine spark - not all of God, but a spark, and that was enough to transform him and give these powers. And that if we really led a pure life (which seemed to involved hating everything to do with our body) then we might come close to. That does solve the Superpower thing - but not the dying for our sins thing.

Others said he was an example of what we could be. So he wasn't divine or Godly at all - he was just the best human, the one who never sinned. Which solves some problems, but not that Jesus himself claimed to be God - when he forgave sins, or at his trial.

The church was never really tempted to say that he was just God pretending - after all - that is what Romans and Greek gods did all the time - appear as a human, have some fun, and then go back to mount Olympus. They wanted to distinguish that Jesus was a real human, not a myth.

Their answer, and I'm afraid the church has often resorted to this - was to invent a new word to describe what was going on.

The incarnation is God becoming human - creating a new thing. The incarnation describes Jesus as fully human - 100%, and fully God - 100% - and somehow that adds up to 100%.

And in order for for God to be fully human in Jesus, there must be something going on which will delight those who like logic problems. There have always been brain teasers like - can God make a wall so high that he cannot jump over it? Problem you see - if he can't make a wall that high, then his power is limited, his freedom is limited. On the other hand, if he succeeds, then he's not all powerful. The answer (apart from the fact that God is God you idiots!) is that God can choose to limit his power, or his knowledge, because he is God.

And so in Jesus, there was a limiting of God's knowledge and power. He chose not to have all knowledge, or all power, or all presence. Its sometimes referred to as kenosis, or self emptying.

And I'm still trying to get my head around it, so if you've only just thought about it and its making your head hurt, well, give yourself some time to get used to it.

**He came from His blest throne salvation to bestow
But men made strange, and none the longed for Christ would know**

The reason that God becoming flesh was such a big deal is that much of Greek thought was that the flesh was seen as weak. Greek myths are all about finding the vulnerabilities of God's or humans who might show they were nearly as good as the Gods. So why would God choose to make himself weak?

Buddhism - founded some 6 centuries before Christ, was all about getting to a higher spiritual plane, where you could accept the suffering of this world and escape to a Nirvana. Bodies - ie which animal you come as, in reincarnation are used as reward and punishment. Hinduism too goes on astral journeys, leaving the body.

Judaism is quite different - it does not have a split view of body and spirit - and if you think about its theology its got a very physical understanding of our spirituality - if someone is born blind - it must be because they sinned. Skin diseases are signs of sin. Eat the wrong flesh or meat, and its a sin. God and the body are well linked, as if the body is one of the ways that God tells us if we're doing ok or not. Hence the barren woman as compared to the fertile one, or the image of God as Israel's wife - they are that united - physically and spiritually.

But, for all that, the world, and all humans, are cursed by Adam's disobedience - by some fall, that meant all physical world is subject to sin and decay. Adam brought death to the world. Adam and Eve can no longer stand to be in God's presence - they are separated - God is made separate - which is what "holy" means. And attempts to get back to heaven - the tower of Babel, are thwarted. Even when Moses is sent by God, he is so holy they cannot approach the mountain. He gives them rules to keep them safe from him, because our separation just gets greater.

So sin is not a list of things we do or don't do - those things are just the symptoms of the disease.

Sin is like an infection - that we have and we pass on

Its like we're a piece of blotting paper and as soon as we come near the ink - it starts to spread across the sheet

Or its like humans are chocolates or cakes that come out of a mould, and as soon as that tin or mould got dented - well, every chocolate or cake afterwards is going to have that wonky bottom or funny bit on it.

Sin is not what we do, its what we are - and its physical - in the bible at least. By which I mean, there's a reason why the first people mentioned in the bible are hundreds of years old, and then get less and less - that's the ink working through the blotting paper.

So - God's answer, is to send a new mould, a new piece of blotting paper that's resistant to ink, so send someone who can be an infection break - someone who can give us a new start.

Enter - the new Adam, the second Adam, the one to reverse the fall, who will be sinless - not because he's never done anything wrong - but far more deeply, because he's not got the disease.

Are you still with me - well done! Because now we're moving on to Christmas!

**From the squalor of a borrowed stable,
By the Spirit and a virgin's faith;
To the anguish and the shame of scandal**

**Came the Saviour of the human race.
But the skies were filled with the praise of heaven,
Shepherds listen as the angels tell
Of the Gift of God come down to man
At the dawning of Immanuel.**

One of the really exciting, grown up things, about Christmas, is that this unique creature - God / Man is created, comes among us. Like an alien - but looking like us. From out of space, and out of time - from marbled courts he comes to the squalor of a borrowed stable.

And so God hallows humanity - makes it holy again - and I'm afraid we're just going to have to say that by coming as a male, he was including female - or go down some rabbit hole about Mary being purified by birth.. lets not get into all that - the issue is that flesh is good enough for God. Made good by God. There is no separation any more - he has reconciled us. Jesus is the bridge. And you'll have heard me say this - he is the one that changes the Trinity and humanity by doing what he does. Because of Christmas, God will never be the same again - there will be some human flesh as part of it - and humanity will never be the same again - for when the ascension comes - he takes us into heaven. And.. the early church theologians said - Jesus assumed all of humanity - every part of it - for the unassumed is the unhealed, or unredeemed. If it was just a human leg that Jesus had, then only the leg would be made new in God. If it was just a body shell - then only that would be redeemed, if it was everything but emotions - then our emotions would have no place in the Godhead. But Jesus got angry, and laughed and was happy and loved. He was 100% human - and so all of flesh is made new again in him, every part of us, every sense.

Its why Christmas is such a big deal.

Senseless

Its an old testament law, that Jesus repeats -
You shall love the lord your god with all your heart, soul, and strength.
Whilst disliking the separation between heart, soul and strength, I take this to mean that we love God with everything we have - our whole lives. And all our flesh and bodies too - these skin and bones that Jesus thought worthy enough to dress in and adopt as his own.

And let us consider that God has given us our senses... and how they might help us in worship.
And we'll start with the most obvious

Well - you've been using your hearing a lot - all these words!
And we love to listen to the Bible, which would always have been a book we read out loud.
We hear things that make us joyful and inspired, and things which annoy and upset us.
We hear the wonderful natural world, bird songs, animals, leaves in trees, waterfalls.
And we hear our fellow humans - their laughter and tears - all to feed in to our connection with God.
And sometimes we hear singing...

And then there is the close sibling of hearing - speaking! Or Singing
Our voices take us close to God as we pray and praise.
Or as we speak comfort or restraint to others.
We use our voices a lot to connect with God.

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We see - nature, and the beauty of God's creation all around us.
We see pictures - and of course there's been great debate about this.
Jesus painted word pictures - if you tell a parable of a farmer, or the woman making bread - its impossible not to "see it".
And we read the words in books - with our eyes
And if we have been taught - some can read Icons too. - maybe next year..

A man that looks on glass..

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And then how we can use the sense of touch, or our physical bodies for worship

Well I know some people are very tactile - Rebecca (and her sister) if you take them in a shop they will run their hands over everything! We can touch a stone, or a leaf, or fur - and praise our creator.

We can, in happier times, hug and hold someone - in a healing embrace.

We can also pray standing, or kneeling - or lying down - using all our body to worship God.

I'm not ashamed to say that sometimes in my quiet times, alone with God, I do a little dance.

No ones watching, except the angels, and my lord. Try it!

And so we worship God with all our senses -

WAIT - because you know I've missed out smell, you know where I'm going.. but here's the post communion prayer for the 8th Sunday after Trinity, which is beautiful, but misses out smell!

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Strengthen for service, Lord,
the hands that have taken holy things;
may the ears which have heard your word
be deaf to clamour and dispute;
may the tongues which have sung your praise be free from deceit;
may the eyes which have seen the tokens of your love
shine with the light of hope;
and may the bodies which have been fed with your body
be refreshed with the fullness of your life;
glory to you for ever.

And smell - which I want to combine with taste - is so important. A friend of mine in my last parish fell down the stairs and bumped her head. She was fine, except for losing her sense of smell. And how it turned her life upside down - coffee was just hot, brown liquid. Eating was just chewing stuff. It took away a huge part of her enjoyment of life.

So look, let me tell what happened with the incense!

I was looking round the vestry, which is really like an Aladdin's cave - its even got a lamp!

And I saw this old thing and wondered what it was.

Full of ash. Something to do with incense I thought. Curious, I noticed a bejewelled box - with incense. And heres's a spoon!

Now I promise you I have very little experience of incense - I've seen it swung about, I lived in a street where on a Sunday the whole row of houses smelt of it. But its never been my thing at all. But something drew me to this box with charcoal in, and these tongs to hold the charcoal while lighting it.

And before I knew what had happened - the incense was giving off the sweetest smell imaginable.

And as I took it out to chancel where I was going to pray I saw that there was this smoke - like my prayers, the bible says, going up to God - all the things I could and couldn't say. But it was better than that - the smoke was like a visible sign, in the shafts of sunlight of the presence of God - as if God was revealing that he was present in this place.

And I love having a candles when I pray - to help focus, to remind me of Jesus, all those things. But now, when I closed my eyes to pray, I could still smell the incense - that reminder that this is a holy thing I'm doing, I'm praying - and God's here - in my very nostrils - Job 27:3

So I know that it really sets some people's asthma off, and for others, it has a lot of baggage - but its been helping me pray for the last few months, and what I'd say is - not to try incense, unless you want to, but don't be afraid to experiment with connecting with God with all of this wonderful body that you've been given. I know people run and exercise and feel connected to God. Maybe you feel your body is failing - but maybe even those aches and pains can be something to connect you - at least you have a nervous system that registers your pain, or like Jacob - that limp that would always remind him of his encounter with God.

Final

So - there's much more, but I hope its a small window into why Christmas is not just for children and the riches of our Christian faith that we remind ourselves of, and that are celebrated at this time of year. Its SO much more than presents, angels, and a baby in a stable - its the moment the universe changed, and the moment God changed - and its a huge thumbs up to the human race.

May the Father,
who has loved the eternal Son
from before the foundation of the world,
shed that love upon you his children.
Amen.

May Christ,
who by his incarnation gathered into one
things earthly and heavenly,
fill you with joy and peace.
Amen.

May the Holy Spirit,
by whose overshadowing Mary became the God-bearer,
give you grace to carry the good news of Christ.
Amen.
And the blessing ...