

An Iconoclast's View of Christmas
Address to St Paul's — 28th December 2003

Most of us, maybe all of us, have just experienced a normal Christmas. It has been a time of Good News, Joy, Peace, and Glad Tidings. The giving and receiving of presents. Enjoying great food and wine. Family. Kids.

Go and wish someone a Merry Christmas and A Happy New Year, then sit in a seat you've never sat in before.

The congregation all moved to new seats! Two of our musicians sat at unfamiliar instruments. Two of the young men took up position behind the communion table, facing the congregation.

What do you see from this new point of view?

A fresh look at the church building?

My better side? My worse side?

A processional cross you never knew was there!

A glass fronted box with a book inside it?

How big is that eagle?!

We've treated Christmas in the same way. We've been looking at Christmas from only one point of view. And mostly it's the point of view of Kmart, Christmas Cards and Channel 9. I believe there are things we overlook, if we only see Christmas from the usual point of view. These are:

- 1. The world was unbelievably hostile to the birth of Jesus.*
- 2. The news was given to all the wrong people.*
- 3. It wasn't really his birthday anyway.*

Hostility towards Jesus.

The New Testament tells the loveliest possible story about Christ's birth, but it tells this lovely story against a terrifying backdrop, and that backdrop is a very large part of the whole message of Christmas.

Isaiah has two passages that talk of a virgin, a son and Immanuel. The usual one we read at Christmas is Isaiah 9:6. The less common passage is 7:14.

Why is it more common to read 9:6? Because there, hope and progress is emphasised. It talks about people who walk in darkness see a great light. The nation grows. Tyrants are done away with. There is no need for armies or their equipment. Amazing Counsellor, Strong God, Eternal Father, Prince of Wholeness. Promises fulfilled. There is certainty about the future.

We like all this.

Why is the other passage less commonly read in church at Christmastime?

Well, because it's not as nice. Nor as hopeful. The first 6 chapters of Isaiah are about the judgement that God and the prophet make about the nation.

[The following from The Message]

The nation is in a bad way.

Children are turning against their parents.

Even the farm animals won't do as they're told.

The people don't know up from down.

Nothing's working right.

The country is a wasteland.

Cities burned down.

The land destroyed by outsiders while everyone just looks on helplessly.

Worship is just a pretence, a charade.

The churches are full of commotion instead of worship, and meanwhile sin abounds.

Money is Counterfeit.

The wine is watered-down.

Their leaders tell lies, keep company with crooks and can be bought by the highest bidder.

A world full of hokey religion, witchcraft and pagan hocus-pocus.

A world rolling in wealth, stuffed with things, no end to its machines and gadgets, and gods of all sorts and sizes.

Cities are emptying out.

Police and protection is breaking down.

Children are in charge of cities.

People are at each other's throats, stabbing one another in the back.

Nobody is game to take responsibility.

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But, don't worry, God says, a virgin will give birth to a son, named Immanuel—God With Us. According to Isaiah, the reason that the child will be born is to deal with this world. And this world is hostile to him and his message.

In the same way, the world Jesus was born into was hostile to him and his message.

Here are just a few indications of just how hostile.

His mother was an unmarried girl (in Hebrew, the word for virgin means maiden. The two ideas, of virginity and unmarriedness are the same in Hebrew thought. There's a commentary begging to be made, but you can do it in your own head.

The point is that this is all wrong. In this culture, having a child out of wedlock was a dreadful disaster for the girl and all her family. Joseph wanted to do the honourable thing and offered to break off the engagement. He knew that the world would be hostile to the child. Yet, he realised that's what God intended.

In Bethlehem there is no room for them in the Inn and they are offered a stable. Even today, farm houses in the Bethlehem area are two storeys. The stable is underneath. Not a barn out the back. I've been to Bethlehem in January when the snow was a metre high on the ground. The animals are not out in the fields. They are kept inside, below stairs. This has the dual advantage of keeping the cattle warm and the house too. But it has a certain olfactory impact. Let's just say that by the end of winter, your average Palestinian farmhouse is in need of a serious airing.

There is some conjecture about whether it really was winter when Jesus was born. So maybe the stable was actually clean and tidy, and not full of manure and animal sweat. But, either way, clean or dirty, a stable is no place for a child to be born. There is no place in the world for Jesus. The world is hostile. He's outside of regular society from the word Go.

But more clear than any of these factors is what happens when the King hears of Jesus' birth. We don't usually read this passage at Christmas either. It only takes one verse in Matthew (2:16) that mentions a horrific slaughter. King Herod is so hostile to the idea of Jesus that he massacres every boy under two years old. The Slaughter of the Innocents.

So this is another, less common, but equally important message about Christmas. The world is hostile to our Lord and Saviour. The world was hostile in the time of the prophet Isaiah. The world was hostile to Jesus when he was born. And the world is still hostile to the Messiah and his Good News today.

Did you find the description of the world in Isaiah's time, disturbingly familiar? Has the world really changed so much from Isaiah's time. Would the prophet not make the same judgements against today's culture that he did in his own time?

So this is the first idea we may overlook if we only see Christmas from the usual perspective. The world that we live in is still very like the world of Isaiah's time. Like Jesus' day. Our world remains hostile to Jesus and the Good News. The Christmas story is about God With Us. And about God entering a world that is ready to hate him, and ready to reject him.

The News Is Given To The Wrong People.

The second idea I reckon we usually overlook is that the news about Jesus birth was given to the wrong people.

Who is first to hear?

Mary. Muriel Porter writing in The Age last Saturday said:

Mary was extraordinary, not because she was supposedly a virgin, but more seriously because she was, in every sense of the word, an outcast.

Desperately poor (Nazareth was a struggling subsistence agricultural community), almost certainly illiterate, and utterly powerless as a Jewish woman in Roman-occupied first century Palestine, she was also found to be pregnant before she was married.

If her fiancé Joseph had not been willing to make an honest woman of her, she could have been stoned to death. This was not an unusual condemnation. In most societies until very recently, pregnancy out of wedlock has been a scandal of mammoth proportions.

It is scarcely surprising, then, that the Virgin Mary was early on given a respectability make-over. The poor, frightened, peasant girl who should have been feted as the example par excellence of God's preference for the vulnerable and powerless, was instead idealised as the Queen of Heaven. Jesus' highly irregular birth family was sanitised and romanticised.

Most people think that the second person to hear the news, at least according to Luke's version, is Mary's cousin, Elizabeth. But that's not quite right. The second person who gets the news about Jesus is actually John the Baptist. Mary goes and visits Elizabeth who is pregnant with John the Baptist. When Mary says Hello, Elizabeth's baby leaps in her womb. He recognises Jesus in vivo.

And that leads us to the third person who hears the news. Elizabeth gets the message from the Holy Spirit, because of her baby's kick and realises Mary is the mother of Jesus.

So far we have an unknown, unmarried girl. Next we have an unborn baby. And then the wife of an insignificant priest. Do you see a pattern emerging here? A whole structure of authority and power is being bypassed. There is no announcement in the local papers. The King is not advised. The church leaders remain ignorant. Radio news is silent. Jerusalem TV doesn't cover the event.

But maybe, when Jesus is born, the news will be given to society's right people? Nope.

When the time comes, it is shepherds out in the fields at night. Now these are not sheep owners, but hired hands. In Australia we think of sheep farmers as a kind of aristocratic occupation. The country that rode on the sheep's back still thinks highly of sheep station owners. But not in Palestine in Jesus' day. These would be the LAST people you would normally think of to tell any news. People who worked the night shift with the sheep, couldn't get any other work. They were probably ex-cons. Shepherds were included in the list of people who couldn't enter the temple. Yet, the news of Jesus is given to them. We overlook just how extraordinary this must have seemed at the time.

But we're not done yet.

Eight days later Joseph and Mary go to the temple and two other people hear about Jesus. Who hears the news? The archbishop? The chief priest? The chief warden? Any vestry member?

No. Simeon. Not a priest. Just a man who was “righteous and devout.” If this was a rare quality in Palestine in that time, it was so because society then, as now, did not value righteousness or devoutness.

Next, Anna. Her qualifications are only that she is 87 years of age, been a widow for about 60 of her years, and she’s always in the church.

How would we feel if the angels came to Boronia to announce Jesus’ birth and they don’t talk to the wardens, or the vicar, or the vestry, or any of the other people who have leadership roles here, but merely mention it to some old lady who does some job that hardly anyone notices? But that’s what happened here.

*And then we have the so-called Three Wise Men. First, we don’t know how many there were. The Bible just says they brought three gifts. And they were not Kings. And they may not have been too wise. The hymn we sang today, *We Three Kings of Orient Are* is a worthy piece of hymnology. It just happens to be wrong. These visitors were actually astrologers. People who thought you could tell the future by the position of the stars. And this time, God makes them lucky. They get one forecast right.*

A good day for Capricorns to be born. A connection with farmyard animals and social outcasts can be important. Lucky sign: A Star In The East, Lucky Number –Seven.

*A whole religious and political structure is bypassed and God announces his birth to the person who writes the Stars column in *New Idea*!*

Yet this is another part of the message of Christmas. Not to be overlooked.

First, the world is hostile to Jesus, so, second, he announces his birth to the people who are most likely to understand what it is like to be outcast, marginalised, the victims of society’s hostility. The unmarried mother knows what it is like to be outcast by society. The convicted criminal who tries to get work in society, knows hostility. The senior citizen knows that society can express its hostility to the old. Jesus comes to the marginalised to find people who can understand his message of how to transform society.

So, first, hostility. Second, the wrong people get the message.

It’s Not His Birthday Anyway!

*Third, is it Jesus’ birthday anyway? Dr Karl S. Kruszelnicki, writing in last weekend’s *Good Weekend* gives us the drum.*

Jesus’ birthday is celebrated on December 25, in the year AD1. But he was born neither on that day nor that year.

First, the year. We can narrow down the year of Christ’s birth to a window between 4BC and 6BC. Jewish historian Flavius Josephus tells us that Herod (then King of Judea) died sometime between a lunar eclipse (a relatively rare event) and the Passover, which followed closely thereafter. In 4BC, there was a lunar eclipse on the night of March 12-13, preceding the Passover on April 11.

Herod had interpreted Biblical prophecy to imply that an infant born in Bethlehem would be “King of the Jews”. Worried about the threat to his reign, he decreed that all male children less than two years old should be killed. Jesus’ parents, Mary and Joseph, fled to Egypt. So Jesus was probably born between 6BC and 4BC.

Second, Christ was not born in winter. The Bible says there were shepherds “abiding in the fields” keeping watch over their flocks by night. It is a Talmudic tradition that sheep were kept indoors from November to March, because of the cold and wet weather. Only from early spring to late summer did shepherds stay out with their flocks. So it’s unlikely that Jesus was born between November and March.

The oldest written documentation of Christ’s birthday being celebrated on December 25 is in the Philocalian Calendar (a Roman almanac) of AD354, which indicated that the Church has been doing this since AD336.

But how did December 25 come to be The Day? That date is very close to the longest night/shortest day – the winter solstice. The Romans (and many others) held special celebrations around the longest night to lift people’s spirits. The Roman feast of Saturnalia was held between December 17 and 24. Restrictions on slaves were relaxed, presents were given, and all the commercial and legal business was suspended.

So December 25 changed from the Sun of God (the festival of the unconquered Sun) to a celebration of the Son of God.

So our Christmas celebration is a takeover of a Roman festival, called Saturnalia. Even some of the traditions, like giving presents and shutting shops are simply borrowed from an earlier pagan festival!

Some Christians get very upset about this sort of thing. But I don’t. I think this is exactly what God had in mind. And what he has in mind for us today.

God’s Subversive Methodology

The world is hostile to the Good News of Jesus because that good news is about transforming our personal lives, and also about transforming society. Pages and pages of the prophets are about turning society on its head. Not about making something better, or nicer, or easier. But about wholesale changes. Bad rulers being expelled. Armies completely disarmed and turned into farmers. Unjust systems dismantled. Corruption stamped out entirely. The wholeness and peace of the Prince of Peace requires nothing less than the transformation of society.

And God’s methodology is completely subversive. He chooses those already on the margins of society. The poor, the dispossessed, the sinned against. Society is to be transformed by giving to these people God-With-Us and inviting them to undertake the work of transforming the world that hates them.

And he does that by entering right into the world and changing it. Pagan festivals are transformed into Christian ones. Old traditions are reinterpreted through the Messiah’s message and become new traditions with new meanings. Old rituals are kept, but given new meaning.

Over and over we see this in the history of the church. One example, often overlooked, is in Ephesians 5 (a passage commonly read at weddings). Paul takes the Roman House Code that would have been known in every Roman home in the world, and copies it out almost word for word. Except he adds a couple of revolutionary Christian ideas, like husbands should love their wives and give themselves for her as Christ did for his Church. Almost every other word in the list would have been known to the Christians in Ephesus as the Roman House Code.

So it's not surprising to me that the early Christian Church took over an existing festival and rewrote it. They transformed a pagan festival into a celebration of Jesus' birth. They didn't run a festival in opposition. They made a takeover bid.

And this is our calling today. Not to keep our faith locked up in the church. That is exactly what a hostile world wants. A hostile world will try to convince us that Christianity is a private matter, best kept for Sundays and inside church walls. This is not what the Bible says.

We need to understand the whole message of Christmas. Sure, it is about a baby being born. A wonderful baby. Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. But it also reminds us that the world into which he comes is a world ruthlessly opposed to Him and His message.

The world pretends to be neutral towards Christianity. It pretends to embrace our message in the media and on every shop counter. But the message of material consumerism is not our message. And thinking that shopping equals Christmas is blasphemy. The animosity of today's culture against Christianity is as ideologically predetermined today as it was in King Herod's day. In response, the message of Christianity is counter-cultural and subversive.

We are called to get out of our comfortable and familiar seats in the church and get about the business of transforming the world in which we live. The problem is that it is harder and harder to see the message of Christmas in this way, so diluted by the spirit of the age have our Christian sensibilities become.

If we only see Christmas through the filters of consumerism and mass media, we shall not see the Christmas of the Bible. We shall see a Christmas that has been sanitised and disempowered by the world. The true story of Christmas is much more than the Christmas we find at Myer, much more than we experience at the Myer Music Bowl. As good and right as these might be, they are not the whole story.

The only true and complete story of Christmas is here. In the Bible.

May the true Spirit of Christmas in all of its wonder, love and world-changing power invade your life, our church, and our world. A-men.