

Along the track

Christmas After All!

In the lead up to Christmas last year, a number of articles appeared in the daily press with a common theme, the loss of Christmas. One writer lamented that, *As 25 December nears, it's hard to know where to find beauty and meaning, let alone any joy. Yes, there is a joy about Christmas but not so much this year.* So he suggested that: *In the absence of joy, this Christmas must be one for quiet contemplation.*

Another wrote that: *Now is when, I think, religion – if I had it – could be such a balm. Perverse, really, given it begins so many wars and is responsible down the ages for so much killing.* But Christmas, in his view, was a balm, a solace, a comfort. Another writer rather grudgingly admitted: *I love choosing gifts for my family and friends, the smell of cinnamon and cloves in mulled wine, decorating the tree. I even have a soft spot for a nativity play. You can enjoy a good myth without believing in it, after all.*

These weren't isolated examples. A number of such articles seemed to herald a change from the usual Christmas laments that there is too much spending, too much extravagance, the divisiveness of religion and so on. For some reason, this particular lead-up to Christmas marked a genuine affection for this season and the gift and opportunities it offers, despite the lack of faith for some. To paraphrase the authors' words, despite everything that is happening in our world, Christmas does bring joy and we must need to mark it in some way.

For so many, Christmas is a time of joy, of happiness, of family and community whether they be people of faith or not. One of the writers asked: *What is happiness, anyway? Does anybody know? It's more like the thing that Christians call grace: you can't earn it, you can't strive for it, it's not a reward for virtue. It exists all right... so let's appreciate what we do have instead of complaining about what we don't.*

Not a bad thought! These articles had a common theme that it is hard to let go of Christmas. Today we live in an age where most people seem to get their knowledge of the Catholic church or the Christian faith through its portrayal in novels, drama, social media, the bad press it has justifiably attracted. But there's more than that. Jesus is rapidly disappearing from our culture, Christianity seems to be retreating back into the churches and cathedrals, back into formulas and doctrine apart from those organisations that reach out to the poor, the lonely, the refugee. Pope Francis urged us to go out into the community, to find out what God is doing 'out there.'

For those of us who grew up in a culture where the Christian story was told and retold, Jesus was part of our psyche, our imagination and so the Christian story holds great meaning. Despite who we are and what background we may have, every year the Christmas story invites us back – perhaps 'back' is the wrong word, rather it invites us to new understandings, new appreciation of its mystery, that Jesus is one of us. Christmas is meant to bring us back to the crib, to the new life that entails, to new ways of thinking and understanding the old mysteries.

We can, if we wish, blame religion for the wars and the killings or we can take on board that Christmas is a reminder that despite all the horrors, the wars, the violence, the disappointments of his day and ours, Christmas reminds us that Jesus calls me to work with him to do something about that, to be a person who brings hope and comfort, to be a person who gives the hungry something to eat, or the thirsty something to drink, a person who invites the stranger, and cares for the sick. We can be a peace maker.

Jesus told us, love one another AS I have loved you, in other words in the way that I have loved you. He took people who needed comfort and healing by the hand, he embraced them, he spoke to the outcastes, the foreigners, he comforted those who were suffered and dying. He invited us to work for peace and justice. He invited us to work with him.

So the lack of hope, joy and happiness that these writers had so lamented can be addressed perhaps not so much by buying presents or laying blame but by being one who takes on the message of Christmas and lives it.

Regards

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