

## Is It True?

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney by David Gill, on Christmas Day 2014.*

Some years ago, Channel Ten brought us "The Nanny Christmas Special".

Not to be missed, said the TV guide. "Fran [the star] travels to the North Pole. She flirts with Santa, sings with elves, battles an evil princess and" – wait for it – "teaches everyone the true meaning of Christmas".

Forgive me, Channel Ten, but I gave it a miss and was left pondering the birth of Jesus Christ unenlightened by Fran's polar pilgrimage, her flirtations with Santa, her elfin singing and her brawl with an ethically challenged royal.

No wonder one of my friends says the Church's seasonal prayer should be "Forgive us our Christmases, as we forgive those who Christmas against us".

It's not just television. Secular civic Christmases can never amount to much. The world splurges on parties, trying to celebrate nobody knows quite what. It eats, visits relatives, overspends on gifts, drinks a bit too much, and takes its holidays to recover. Harmless enough, I guess, if you like that sort of thing. But civic Christmases, by their very nature, are pretty vacuous events.

Church Christmases are much better. The candles are lit, as we continue to brave the darkness that is around us, between us, within us. Old stories are recycled, kindling our imaginations. Old carols are sung, stirring afresh our dreams. While somewhere deep within surges the hope that all this religious stuff might just mean something.

Might.

If only we could get beyond the sentiment. If only we could come to grips with the essence of Christmas.

Let's try to do just that. Today we are hearing and singing about the story. Now come the questions: what is it all about, and is that belief true or is it rubbish?

I don't mean the details: angels, virgin births, a wandering star, astrologers with their gold, frankincense and myrrh. These things are the wrapping paper, not the gift; the tinsel, not the treasure. They are colourful stories and we love them. But whether they are literally true is beside the point, indeed a preoccupation with them can easily distract us from the point.

The point, the one absolutely crucial point, is the belief that provoked those stories in the first place: the extra-ordinary, heart-stopping, history-bending claim of the Christian faith.

The claim that the impenetrable silence which surrounds us, the vast mystery which embraces us, is love beyond anything mortals could create or imagine; love we have glimpsed in the child of Bethlehem, love that goes to a cross and beyond for the likes of you and me. The claim that, in Christ, humanity has glimpsed the heart of God. That in him, the divine has become flesh, walked among us, lived our life and died our death.

As I reminded the congregation last night – no, early this morning! – there is a word from the Hebrew scriptures we often hear at this time of the year. It is “Immanuel,” and it means “God with us”. St Matthew’s gospel applies that word to the birth of Jesus. So does our last carol this morning. That’s what Christmas is about, what Christians around the world today are celebrating. For some, it is an awesome conviction. For others, a heartfelt yearning. For all of us, a wondrous possibility.

God with us. Can it really be?

Tell me if you must that it’s just wishful thinking. Tell me it’s a fraud perpetrated by church leaders and theologians who want to keep their jobs. Tell me that God, if there is one, doesn’t give a damn about humanity. Tell me pretty well what you like.

But do not tell me the question doesn’t matter.

It matters enormously. If God is with us in Christ, that makes a vast and enduring difference. To how we see ourselves and our neighbours. To how we live in our world and make sense of our history. To our hoping and loving, our living and dying. On this cosmic hinge, so much else swings.

John Betjeman, in his poem on Christmas, catches well the breathlessness of the question:

*And is it true,  
This most tremendous tale of all,  
Seen in a stained-glass window’s hue,  
A baby in an ox’s stall?  
The Maker of the stars and sea  
Become a Child on earth for me?  
And is it true? For if it is ...*

*No love that in a family dwells,  
No carolling in frosty air,  
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells  
Can with this single truth compare –  
That God was man in Palestine  
And lives today in Bread and Wine.*

Is it true?

We seeking an answer, remember, that by its very nature can never be crisp, clear and obvious. A few days ago, *The Christian Century* ran a piece by a young theologian entitled “All I want for Christmas is the gift of uncertainty”. After recalling us to a child’s capacity for wonder, she writes:

*I am longing for the gift of uncertainty, a type of profound mystery that welcomes questions, a faith that requires a leap of faith to sustain. I don’t want to be told the answers to life’s pain. I want to live through the darkness and grope for God’s Holy Hand....*

*I long to see through a glass darkly, to glimpse a mere outline of God in a fog, because I fear the crisp and clean images of God are mere illusions. When God is definitively contained in creeds and doctrines, we have concluded the search. Then what?*

*I want to keep searching....*

*I want to be led by the God of Mystery, not the Idol of Certainty.*

The answer for which we yearn will not be found in the rhetoric of preachers, the arguments of scholars, the musings of mystics, the zeal of believers or the cynicism of sceptics. Not in the reading of many books, the writing of many dissertations. It will be found by plunging more deeply into the business of living and dying.

To quote the Spaniard Domingo Ortega,

*Bullfight critics ranked in rows  
Crowd the enormous Plaza full;  
But only one is there who knows  
And he’s the man who fights the bull.*

It is in the fighting that we find, in the living that we learn, in the risking that we know. And it is in the journeying that we glimpse the God of mystery, the God of Bethlehem, who – perhaps, long unknown -- rides with us.

We do not travel alone. And we never will. For Christ is born!

Thanks be to God!

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