

Christmas Day

Well, we're here. We've finally made it to Christmas Day, after all the hype since October and the Christmas trees up since the beginning of December. It's par for the course, I suppose, to expect clergymen to get up and rant about people losing the true meaning of Christmas. That's our job, but I'm not going to do that. However much vast swathes of the country may not know that Jesus is the reason for the season, what can't be disputed is that people clearly want to celebrate *something*. I'm pretty sure they are not leaping up and down in excitement about God coming to earth in Jesus to save us, but they *are* clearly wanting to celebrate *something*. But what?

When we think of 'traditional' Christmas festivities we imagine Father Christmas, Christmas trees, snow, reindeer, presents, Christmas cards, turkey, mince pies. We all know that these so-called traditions are not that old. Henry VIII was the first English monarch to have turkey for Christmas, but for centuries the main food was boar, peacock, swan and especially goose.

*Christmas is coming, the goose is getting fat,
Please put a penny in the old man's hat.*

The first Christmas card was commissioned in 1843 by Sir Henry Cole. We get awfully po-faced these days that modern Christmas cards have no 'religious' picture, but if you look at that first Christmas card in 1843 it had no religious theme either. Instead it has a picture of a jolly family drinking wine (even the children!) with the caption, 'A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you'. Those early Christmas cards surprisingly had no religious or winter themes. You might also

like to note that Sir Henry Cole had helped to introduce the penny post three years earlier, but no coincidence, of course! Which brings me nicely to the charge of Christmas being far too commercialised.

If you were to take any child and ask him about Christmas, it wouldn't be long before he told you about Father Christmas and Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer. Did you know that Santa is eighty this year? I mean Santa as we know him today with the big fat tummy, the jolly smile, the red outfit and the Ho! Ho! Ho! Why do we associate Santa with the colours red and white? Even our church newsletter is red for Christmas! Well, a commercial artist called Haddon Sandblom was commissioned by the Coca-Cola company in 1931 to create a 'wholesome' version of Father Christmas to sell their drink. Drink coke and you'll be as jolly and wholesome as Santa is clearly the message they wanted to convey. The whole world now sees Christmas entirely through the eyes of that Coca-Cola image. It must be the most successful advertising campaign in history.

But where did Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer come from? Commerce again! The song was written in 1939 as a promotional gift for the customers of the Chicago-based department store, Montgomery Ward.

And then there are the popular songs all about winter snow. 'I'm dreaming of a white Christmas' sung by Bing Crosby in 1941. 'Winter wonderland' first appeared in 1934. 'Let it snow! Let it snow! Let it snow!' was written in July 1945 in Hollywood during one of the hottest days on record.

Actually there is no evidence whatsoever that Jesus was born in the middle of winter, certainly not on 25 December. Was it a Christianization of the pagan winter solstice rituals or the Roman drunken saturnalia festivities held on 25 December? It's all hidden now in the mists of time, but what I do think is happening, (and has been happening for a very long time), is the desperate human attempt to 'tame' God; to domesticate him, neutralise him.

Banning Christmas would be counterproductive, for it would only embolden Christians by making us martyrs. Far better to water it down by promoting multi-faithism and the teaching of comparative religions. Aren't all religions merely different paths up to the same mountain top? Relativism has done wonders to kill off Christianity as a truth-claim. And instead of banning Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, why not just smother him with other things like a jolly old chap in a red coat giving out presents. Sentimentalise Christmas. Here's a chap giving out things and asking nothing whatever in return. You don't have to listen then to Christ asking you for your very life. He demands from us that we repent and surrender ourselves to his lordship, to his control. Who wants to hear that? Let's have Father Christmas. Let's fill it all with snow and reindeers and trees and turkeys. It's all designed to make us feel good without asking anything of us.

We did the same with Easter. It's now reduced to chocolate eggs and bunnies, isn't it? There's nothing there of the Cross, of sacrifice, of the desperate need to deal with our sin and guilt. We have very cleverly succeeded in

smothering all that with sentimentality. It's called displacement activity. We are so busy celebrating Christmas, but we're actually celebrating nothing. We think we are doing something when in fact we are doing nothing at all.

And yet there remains a deep emptiness at the centre of our society and our personal lives. Next to our little Edgar's grave are two headstones to children absolutely covered with windmills, and bunnies and pooh-bears and all the trash of the day. Our headstone is simple and plain. It just has our deep-felt belief, 'Safe in the arms of Jesus'. It is precisely because these poor people do not have that assurance in Jesus the Saviour that they have to fill their lonely hearts with all this flummery and trash.

Parson Woodford's 18thC diary is a classic. Because belief in Jesus Christ was as natural to him as breathing air to him, he did not have to make a fuss of it. Here is his understated entry for Christmas Day, 1793:

Dec. 25, Wednesday, also Christmas Day. We breakfasted, dined, &c again at home. This being Christmas Day I walked to Church this morning, read Prayers and administered the Holy sacrament, gave for an Offering 0. 2. 6. Had a very respectable Appearance at the Altar to partake with me of the H. Sacrament, 2 Rails. The Singers sang the Christmas anthem and very well, between the Litany and Communion. The following poor People dined at my House or had their Dinner sent them & one Shilling each - Widow Case, my Clerk Tom Thurston, Christopher Dunnell, John Peachman, Tom Carr and Nathaniel Heavers. Nat Heavers & Tom Carr had their Dinners sent then being ill. Gave to the people in all 0. 6. 0. Dinner to day, a boiled Rabbit and Onion Sauce. Surloin of Beef roasted, plumb Puddings and Mince Pies.

May you also have a very happy and blessed Christmas, and may you know the presence of the Blessed Saviour in your homes and in your hearts this day and always.