

PUTTING THE CROSS INTO

CHRISTMAS

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

Christmas is here again, and I wonder what your reaction is. For the children, of course, it is a time of unmitigated pleasurable anticipation, but for the grown ups the coming of Christmas can be something of a burden - presents to be sent off overseas perhaps, letters and cards to be written, shopping to be done, parties and entertainments to be arranged, and others to be fitted in.

Christmas can become quite a burden and its approach an oppression of the spirit. But in the midst of all our preparation we want to take time to reflect on what Christmas implies and what it means. Christmas marks an epoch making event, which is crucial in our attitude to the world and to life; in fact it is crucial for our world view, because Christmas means that God the eternal Creator and judge of all has entered human life Himself. Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary through the Holy Spirit

and the name that He was given at His birth was Emmanuel, which means 'God with us'. God with men is the breath-taking message of Christmas and the first question to ask ourselves is, do we believe it? Apparently we do if we look at the tremendous celebration that goes on at Christmas time in the name of Christ, and yet apparently we don't believe it, if we examine our attitude to life and that of our community which does not seem to be affected at all by this most epoch making fact, namely that in Christ God has taken our nature and that He is Emmanuel, God with us.

This great truth reminds us that God has not left our human race to the consequences of its own turning from Him. He has entered our life and so given human life and history its centre and its meaning. He has a purpose for humanity and this will be completed, for its completion is guaranteed by the fact that He has

taken our nature, that He has become man in Christ.

If we merely looked at events around us as reported, for example, in the newspapers, we would certainly gather little comfort or hope for humanity; but God our Creator has put His seal upon us through the birth of Emmanuel. Christmas is a bright assurance of hope and not merely for humanity in general but for each one of us. We do not know what the future holds and as we look out on the new year we cannot tell what our own individual fortunes will be, but the birth of our Saviour is an assurance that God cares for us in all our weakness. By ourselves we could not find a way back to God, nor find strength to resist the buffetings of life, but Christ's birth for us is a sign that God cares for us. He has come down to where we are.

The slogan "put Christ back into Christmas" deserves our support, for there is a

danger that the great benefits of a yearly celebration of Christmas will be lost in the bustle of buying and celebrating. The festival of Christmas was instituted to bring us the benefit of recollecting that in the birth of the child Jesus, God has guaranteed His concern for humanity in general, as well as for us who put our trust in Him. Our world view and our understanding of history, as well as the hope of our own lives should be centred in Christ and our annual Christmas celebration should be a help to keep this world view clear.

Commercial interests pressurize us to spend money on food and gifts and entertainment, and there is a danger that on the one hand Christmas becomes a burden and on the other that the real purpose of the celebration is lost sight of. Plainly we must resist this process and pressure, and the principle we should adopt is that Christ-

mas is a festival of personal relationships. Do nothing merely because it is the done thing at Christmas, but use Christmas as an opportunity of personal fellowship. If we keep in mind the pleasure that our gifts will bring not only because of their intrinsic usefulness but also because they are an expression of friendship, then any burden that may be felt in their selection and purchase will be lifted.

There is perhaps a more important slogan than "Putting Christ into Christmas" and that is "Putting the Cross into Christmas". You will remember that when the angel announced the birth of our Saviour he made it clear that Christ would be a Saviour. He told Joseph "You shall call his name Jesus for he shall save his people from their sins" (Mt.1:21). Jesus came to save us through His death, as He Himself said as He faced the crucifixion "For this purpose came I to this hour"

(Jn.12:27). Jesus, the name He was given at His birth, means God is Saviour.

It is interesting to compare the tremendous commercial boost that Christmas gets with the exact opposite that surrounds Good Friday. Everybody celebrates Christmas; how few celebrate Good Friday. You see Christmas can appeal to the natural man as well as to the Christian because there is something flattering in the thought that God has become man in Christ if you isolate it by itself. There is no rebuke to our pride in the idea of Emmanuel, God with us, when that idea is isolated. But when it is associated with the cross of Calvary, as it is in the Scripture, then of course our pride is brought down, and we recognise that it is because of our sins that Jesus was born. It is not possible to contemplate the Son of God dying on the cross, crucified by the hands of lawless men, without recognising our own sins and humbling ourselves at the foot of the

cross. But Christmas isolated as an event of its own does not necessarily rebuke our pride in this way, and therefore as we celebrate Christmas, or as our community considers Christmas it must not simply be as the birth of Jesus but rather as the birth of the Saviour who died for our sins and who rose again that we might be raised from death to life. If we put the cross into Christmas, Christmas will be seen in its true light and the love of God reflected in the birth of Christ will be seen more clearly still, for His love is shown not only that He took our nature upon Him but that "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us". Christmas can only be understood in the light of Good Friday and Easter. Good Friday was the reason for Christmas and this thought will cut off the extravagances of our celebrations while deepening our sense of the true significance of this festival.

Christmas is a family festival pre-eminently. The children love it and we love to give them gifts and joy. The Christmas story of the baby Jesus has a special appeal to children. Christmas celebrations are centred in the home. The world view that our celebration of Christmas implies must be applied consistently in the home as well as in the community. Let us ask ourselves the question whether we really believe what Christmas implies - really believe what the two names Emmanuel - God with us - and Jesus - God is our Saviour - imply, namely that world history and our life finds its centre in Christ and apply this question to our home. Does our home find its centre in Christ? We may not as individuals be able to influence dramatically our community - tho' we can play our part - but at least we who are heads of homes have the ordering of our own home life in our hands. Is Christ central? For example, do we have day by day family prayers, when as a family we pray in His name and

read His word, while the father explains any message that may be in the passage read. Does the mother of the family teach the things of Christ to the children of the home as they go to bed? Do we worship Christ our Saviour on Sundays as a family?

Christmas is a call to consistency. We celebrate Christmas joyfully because we remember God's gift to us, the coming of the Saviour. Our celebrations imply that we believe these things, that God has entered into a very close relationship to us. Let us see to it that our thoughts are based on the world view that this fact implies, and that our lives, and our homes, and our community are centred on Christ Who was born at Bethlehem to be our Saviour which He fulfilled on Good Friday and Easter Day.

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