

Dare we believe in Christmas?

by Bruce Duncan*

THE BUSY CRUSH of Christmas time can crowd out of our minds the earthy simplicity of that first Christmas. And even should our thoughts play around the events of Jesus' birth, they can find it hard to step behind the stage props to consider the meaning of it all. The actors have become too predictable, the plot wearingly familiar, the scene all too comfortable. Only in the eyes of children does the magic come alive.

While much of the world will stop to celebrate the birth, not all understand. For many, social formalism will swallow any deeper meaning. Yet formalism does not explain Christmas. Why should peoples from East and West, rich and poor, from vastly different cultures, all pack earnestly around the crib to wonder at a baby born obscurely so long ago? Why do people speak so naturally of peace? Why are all briefly united in human frailty, so that divisions of race, politics and nationality suddenly seem so trivial? Only a believer can unravel these riddles.

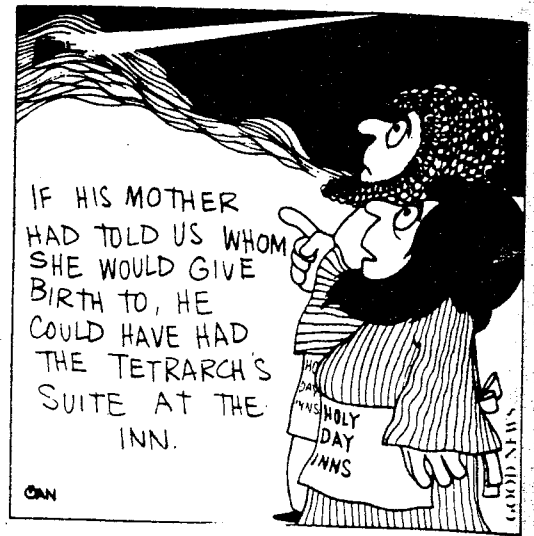
The scandal of a God-man

The baby at Bethlehem revolutionised the Jewish religion: Jesus claimed to be God enfleshed, 'incarnate', God-become-man. Indeed the Jews were right to be scandalised, for such a claim is either blasphemy, or a totally unexpected step by God into human flesh and history.

It is this claim of Jesus which alone makes his birth significant. Throughout history, Christians will try to understand this, preserving both his being as God and his being as man.

In Chesterton's words, "... Christ is not a Being apart from God and man, like an elf, not yet a Being half human and half not, like a Centaur, but both things at once, thoroughly, very man and very God ...". Here is the supreme paradox of faith, and one with startling implications.

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If our God has become a man then he is no distant and demanding Lord, only slightly interested in our affairs. He has become one of us; he has worked with his hands, tripped along the dusty roads of Palestine and shared out fortune. Our humanity is also God's humanity. Nothing that is true or good is foreign to Him, but finds its final meaning in Him. True humanism is indeed true Christianity. Henceforth nothing human can be alien to God.

Thus the Incarnation puts an end to any dichotomy between God and man. Hence Christianity cannot retreat into a supernaturalism which spurns the earth and ignores human responsibilities for the

The child argues that men and women are so made in the image of God, that the God of the Old Testament would tolerate no image of Himself but the one He had made: the living image in people. The demands of religion and the demands of humanity are identical: "Act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with your God". One who acts against a brother or sister in this world offends the God in whose image they are made.

The song of the mother backs up her child: "He puts forth his arm in strength and scatters the proud-hearted. He casts the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly. He fills the starving with good things, sends the rich away empty".

Marx at the crib?

sake of some heaven to come. Christianity cannot endure such a spiritism, despite the accusations of Marx.

Marx can stand at the crib and jeer that mankind has made God in its own image, that belief is merely the "sigh of the oppressed" projecting the demand for justice onto a future life. Stamping up and down the streets of Bethlehem, Marx must accuse the child of obscuring man's responsibilities in this world, of serving the rich by providing a sop for the poor. Rightly would he fume at a birth which the powerful could use as a means of oppression, if that were all it was.

But the child must have right of reply. Astonished at the ignorance of this grandson of two Jewish Rabbis, the child tells Marx to stop hiding in the shadow of Feuerbach, and consider the issue for himself. Far from religion being an escape from the demands of earthly justice, the child insists that God demands justice on this earth as the condition for a new life.

Has Marx not heard these words? Or does he think they were unfulfilled?

Indeed, one can feel some sympathy for Marx. Many of the rich of his day cynically used Christianity to keep the masses in their place. The very pharisaism and hypocrisy which Jesus himself railed against helped keep Marx from seeing the truth of Christmas.

The adult Christ will continue the debate with Marx, from a Cross, but ultimately in a tomb or eating fish by a lake. Marx recognised the symptoms of sin in social injustice and fought against them; Christ traced the symptoms to a deeper cause and wrestled with it to the death, and beyond. Jesus accuses Marx of stopping at the superficial level of society and economics; he has not plunged the human heart to see the strange force for evil lurking there. Christ promises to wrestle with man against the demon. Marx ignored the demon, and is bewildered by the demonic

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embodiment of his dreams and of the constructs of his followers.

The shadow of a nuclear cloud

If the adult Jesus has stern words for Marx, his rebuke for those who care nothing for social justice or for the poor is far stronger. Marx ignored the demon within; others indeed befriend it. They need no Saviour, if there is nothing to be saved from.

How strange, when our times have seen the horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, while torture, injustice and oppression are endemic in so many countries; and a nuclear cloud hovers over the entire globe, threatening mankind with a thoroughly demonic outcome, the very stuff of medieval visions of hell.

For many today, Jesus at best is merely a good man, like Socrates, who goes heroically to his death. Such a view ignores his claim to be God, and would logically make him either a raving lunatic or worse, a blasphemer and a liar. Such people do not consider Christ seriously; they make little attempt even to think logically about them.

So thank God for the children at Christmas who teach us to wonder again and ask questions. But thank God too for those like Marx who force us to reject its commercialism and rub our noses in the dirt of the stable floor where the child lies. This God-child is of the earth with a message for the earth about justice and fraternity and peace. *Pace* Marx, God's justice does not ignore human justice. In a hungry world, Christians would do well to remember this. ■