

What is Christmas?

A contemporary parable – or parody? (KS3 and KS4)

Well, have you managed to avoid Slade, the Pogues, Michael Buble, Bing Crosby, Mariah Carey, Wham!, Dean Martin, Nat King Cole, Chris Sievey, Cliff Richard, Elvis Presley, Band Aid.....?

Perhaps the only way to do this is to stay indoors with your fingers in your ears! I'm sure Ebenezer Scrooge would have avoided them all ('Bah! Humbug!'), but I have just come across one school that is hosting a debate: *this House believes Ebenezer Scrooge is a better role model for children than Father Christmas*. What do you think? Being a Grumpy Old Man I might tend to agree with the motion, or, being a Grumpy Old Philosopher, I might prefer to change the motion and deny the validity of the binary choice.....

Either way, what is Christmas? I don't mean what is the whole Biblical and traditional story(-ies), I mean what is it *now* for modern Britain? Thankfully the Daily Mail spoofs that to mention the word 'Christmas' would somehow cause offence to others are a thing of the past, but I have a friend who now insists on wishing me a happy vegetarian Winterval and urges me to engage more with the seasonal solstice and look forward in hope not evidently to the Christ-child but to more daylight. Hmmm.

There again, Advent is replaced by Black Friday and Cyber Week, carols by Jingle Bells, the joy of feasting by guilt over the poor, and the journey of the Magi by Elton John's journey from his first piano. Is this all too negative? – no, but it *is* short-sighted. In a sense this is what Christmas always was – no wonder the Puritans banned it from 1644 to 1647! It has always been jolly and drunken for the majority. It started that way in ancient Rome, when Saturnalia moved to the 25th December. Its 4th Century AD rebranding as the birthday of Jesus followed a century of debate in the churches as to when Jesus was actually born (many days of the year suggested) but the replacement for Saturnalia became official soon after Constantine had embraced Christianity, of a sort, for the Empire.

Another origin is similar, the *Sol Invicta* cult of the Roman World, in which Constantine himself was brought up, which partied on 25th December, but the general idea is the same: a religious/secular festival in the gloom of midwinter. Plenty of other accretions to Christmas have come from similar festivals (Yuletide, for example), in the hope that 'Christianising' them would sanitise them.

So where does this place us today? Should we as Christians bow to what seems inevitable and have our Christmas whilst the world has its Xmas? I say a guarded 'No' to that. Why?

[i] There are many on the fringes of Faith, indeed adherents of other Faiths also, who want life to be more than shopping, reality to be explored, not turned Virtual; we can hold a candle for those people.

[ii] The Christmas stories are our cultural heritage, with a message of 'Peace on earth', of goodwill to all people, of remembering the rejected family with Baby in a manger about to become refugees in Egypt.

[iii] The staggering wealth of music, dramas and poetry speak of a society that desperately needs a central value beyond Brexit and the economy.

[iv] We need something better for our mental health than mere Mindfulness – we need something to be Mindful *of*, namely the hope that Bethlehem can bring us all as we explore its many meanings.

But the real Bethlehem today is a parable of the lives of so many people – under occupation by forces beyond its control, impoverished, walled in, drained of its Christian heritage, the Church of the Nativity in Manger Square commercially exploited – a parody at the heart of Christianity. One Bethlehem tours website (all-in package including Jerusalem and the Dead Sea) includes the comment that ‘For those not interested in Bethlehem there will be free time in Jerusalem’ – presumably the shopping malls of West Jerusalem? Bethlehem has now so little to offer even the commercial tourist.

In our schools we need to explore and exploit the nativity story: life under Roman occupation; an unpopular census for taxation purposes; an illegitimate pregnancy and family shame; an honourable carpenter protecting his young bride-to-be; the value of the family connections in their hometown of Bethlehem; the holy family squashed together in the animal quarter of a peasant house, occasioning ribald remarks from neighbours; the brutality and despotic fear of Herod and the child massacre that follows. Then there is the welcome from the lowly and near-dispossessed (shepherds); and from the wealthy overseas wise (the Magi), with their extraordinary royal gifts that must have seemed so inappropriate when they finally located Jesus, following the star to the Christ-child; then their refugee journey to Egypt.

If we can’t find parables in this shared narrative for our modern world then we seriously lack empathetic imagination.

So let us merge Christmas and Xmas (after all, X is the Greek letter at the start of Christ’s name), let us both use and celebrate the feast and give our gifts; and let us explore the depths of the narrative for our modern world, whose tinsel and plastic cribs are but a parody of reality.

This resource was written by Richard Coupe, one of RE:ONLINE’s Email a Believer team. If your class would like to ask a Christian representative any questions about their beliefs, or to see answers to previously asked questions please visit <http://pof.reonline.org.uk/people-of-faith/christianity/>