



The scandal of the Incarnation

“A merry Christmas, Bob Cratchit,” said Scrooge, with an earnestness that could not be mistaken, as he clapped him on the back.

“A merrier Christmas, Bob, ... I'll raise your salary! And endeavour to assist your struggling family. Yes, we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon, over a Christmas bowl of Smoking Bishop. Make up the fires. And buy another coal-scuttle before you dot another i, Bob Cratchit!” ...

Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, ... he was a second father. And ever afterwards ... it was always said of Scrooge, that he knew how to keep Christmas well.”

‘A Christmas Carol’ is, admittedly, a piece of Victorian melodrama steeped in Christian sentimentality. But, like a mince pie and mulled wine at this time of the year, Charles Dickens tale never fails to hit the spot. Who could possibly resist it? In ‘A Christmas Carol’, keeping Christmas “well” entails nothing less than the transformation of the financially successful but embittered and miserable old Ebenezer Scrooge into a kindlier, gentler man.

You and I gather to celebrate today God the Son, born on this day, for our Salvation, and for a kindlier, gentler world. We do this with other Christians, past and present. But never mind keeping Christmas well. Because in a way ... it's a wonder we have Christmas at all!

The earliest Christians didn't have it. I don't mean that they were “Bah! Humbug!” about Christmas. Though of course, they didn't have Christmas trees, and mulled wine. All of that came later, and much closer to the time of Dickens than the time of Jesus. I mean that the early Christians had just as much trouble with the story of the Incarnation as many people do today. But with one crucial difference.

You and I, in the 21st century, might ask “How could Jesus, an ordinary, first century wandering preacher, be God?” Christians in the past had the exact opposite problem. Their question was: Jesus is God, so how could he possibly be one of us? How could he be human, let alone, someone born in humble circumstances to an unmarried young girl?

It was a scandal! Not that they had any trouble with the words of the creed we will say together later in the service: that Jesus was born “For us and for our salvation;” that was okay. Or that “he came down from heaven;” that was okay. Or even that he “was incarnate from the Holy Spirit.” Whatever that meant, they were okay with that. But they found it embarrassing to say that Jesus “was born of the Virgin Mary,” not because she was a virgin, but because she was a woman: and that meant that Jesus, the Son of God, was undeniably, human. **And so we have the embarrassment and scandal of the incarnation.**

Gods in the ancient world arrive on golden clouds; or arise from the sea; or are born out of eternally appointed whirlwinds. But in Christ's story, **Mary's yes to God becomes God's yes to the world.** And so God's "Yes" to the world – the blinding furnace of his love – burns quietly and grows in Mary's flesh. **And that means coping with the blood and the bodily messiness of an actual birth.** It was a scandal to Christians who wanted to protect God – against his will – from the messiness of the human condition. And this may explain why the earliest traces of the gospels had no nativity story.

But like Charles Dickens, we in our time get to "keep Christmas well" with our imagination fully alive to the scandal of the Incarnation.

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This is why I have chosen for our Christmas reflection the portrait of intimacy we find in our orders of service. It poses a challenge for how we see and hear story of Christmas ... as a story of the Word of God made flesh.

This isn't a nativity scene; it isn't drawn from any biblical story. It's an imagined scene showing a young Jesus with his adoptive father, Joseph the carpenter, working in the shop.

Joseph is going about his business, drilling into a wooden beam. Jesus watches him, in stillness, while holding up a flame. It is only candle light, not divine light piercing from a heavenly height. But the flame nevertheless reveals intimacy between father and son. And for us as viewers, gazing at this scene almost feels intrusive.

If we do look closely, however, it's not long before we realise that this isn't simply a portrait of "Jesus growing up: A day in the life..." There is something else going on here. And it's the reason this painting caused a scandal in the mid-17th century when it was first shown.



'Jesus and Joseph the Carpenter', Georges de La Tour, c. 1642.

For one thing, where are the haloes over the heads? And where are the other symbols and embellishments usually found in religious art? Joseph and Jesus are shown in ordinary clothing of the time. There is nothing there to indicate saintliness or magnificence. This was a shock for people at the time. And there was nothing to cushion the blow: there are no cherubs smiling down from the upper corners; no dove representing divine presence reassuringly nearby.

And yet, the painting is filled with clues that point to the story of Christ and the Incarnation. It's in the light that fills their faces. And some of you will have already detected suggestions of the cross of Christ. Some of you may even see hints of the resurrection in the candlelight passing through flesh, giving the boy's hand a translucent appearance.

But the response at the time was, how dare this artist show the story of incarnation in such a sensual, tangible depiction of flesh? And what about the anxious look in Joseph's eyes? And what about those white knuckles in his hands tightly turning the drill into the beam? If this was intended to echo of the love of God who will see Jesus suffer and die for humanity, then the artist had gone too far. How could ordinary human eyes be made to represent the eyes of God?

This artist is telling us in a visual language what John the evangelist had said to us in word: **“The Word became flesh. And this life is the light of the world. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.”**

It was a scandal. And in the end, the painting had to be removed from the church where it hung and put into a museum. But perhaps this was only right: The story of God in the flesh needs a language that shocks and indiscreetly invades any attempt to retreat into safe, comfortable ideas of a God who knows to keep his distance.

Christmas is not about a God who keeps his distance; it is about One who keeps his promise to be God among us, God who is with us, God who is for us.

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I had a chance to meet the bishop of Damascus when he was in Canterbury. He is formally known as Gregorious The Third, Patriarch Of Antioch And All The East, Of Alexandria And Of Jerusalem. He wears three pectoral crosses representing each of his provinces. It struck me immediately that this is a man with no fear. He is short in stature, and even with his impressive headgear, only stands about 5 foot 9. But he takes long strides when he walks, and moves with determination.

Gregorious travels in and out of Damascus, visiting Syrian Christians around the world, in the many places where they have settled to live in exile. He is with them strengthening their faith, but also reinforcing their links with the many Christians back home. It helps that, in addition to Arabic, Hebrew and Greek, Gregorious III is fluent in at least five European languages.

In his travels, Gregorious also reaches out to people of all Christian traditions with his message that part of what is beautiful about Christianity is that, in Syria, it is distinctly Arab. Gregorious likes to say that Syria is “a school of faith” because, he says, **in Syria, Christ is incarnate in the peace that has kept Christians and Muslims living together for many centuries.** And so he longs for the country's stability so that Muslims and Christians may live at peace once again.

There are one and three-quarter Christians in Syria. Of that population, four-hundred thousand have been displaced by the war, both abroad and within other areas of the country.

I have been thinking about Syria this week, as I know you have as well. I have been thinking how Christians in Syria will keep Christmas well this year. In Syria, of course, Christians have both Western and Eastern Christmas dates, depending on their church tradition. But Gregorius is absolutely clear about the shared aims of all Christians in Syria. So I think he would say that at Christmas they will do what they are always already doing.

Gregorious is fearless, and fully alive to the scandal of the Incarnation: **Jesus is born, the Son of God, as one of us. He comes to meet us, and receives us, whoever we are, just as we are, with a love that will not leave us, and will not leave us unchanged.**

And so this is how Gregorious describes the work of Christians in Syria: he says, we rebuild our churches that are being destroyed; we built the churches, and we can build again. And as Christians, will continue to be mediators of love for the sake of peace between Muslims and other Muslims. And we tell the story of the incarnation.

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I pray that you and I might come more fully alive to the Scandal of Christ born among the poor, born this day in Bethlehem, in Damascus, Aleppo, and everywhere. I pray that in these twelve days, we – along with the Christians of Syria – may know how to keep Christmas well.

And may we taste – in whatever we do – the joy of Christ in that “Christmas bowl of Smoking Bishop” that Scrooge promises in “A Christmas Carol.”

Ingredients: 5 oranges, 2 lemons. 30 whole cloves. pinch of cinnamon, allspice, mace, a thumb-size piece of fresh ginger root, peeled and cut into chunks, 1 bottle of red wine, 1/2 cup sugar, or more to taste, 1 bottle of ruby port. Amen.

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