



Bolting out of religious stables

There are quite a few words here this evening and I don't want to add to them needlessly. I mentioned earlier that where the story and claims of Christmas are concerned, they seem both over-familiar and hardly understood at all. That brief reading from Francis Spufford ¹ makes the same point.

It is a theme that has occupied my thinking, off and on, over decades: how do we get to know the meaning of the Gospel in such a way as to change who we are and how we live?

It is a challenge. Perhaps especially so with Christmas. There is a lot of candy floss around the whole thing. Sentimental accretions and dodgy hymns and carols.

How you experienced Christmas as a child will of course shape how you read it now. (Let me give an example, and by way of a confession: at infant school I was cast as the first of the Three Kings to glide majestically onto the stage of the village school hall. Being a shy and an introvert, this theatrical prominence filled me with dread. In my panic, I bribed the second king to swap places – bribed him with a sherbet fountain and a pack of wine gums. Being behind the lead king and ahead of the one bringing up the rear offered some cover and comfort. But I felt very bad that I might have offended the baby Jesus, and I felt troubled by my first (and let me say my only) foray into bribery and corruption).

And even if you have arrived at adult maturity, it may still be the case that Christmas carries altogether too many associations for you to get its message.

But we really ought to try.

Advent and Christmas are the Christian seasons when we think about the Incarnation. That's the name for the Church's claim that the timeless, eternal Creator God entered into time-bound human experience. That He – She – did this not as a passing visitor taking in the sights, but as a permanent arrival. But even that doesn't give the true picture. It's not just an arrival, but a penetration. Penetration by this irrepressible God in to the very fabric of the Creation: at the very molecular level. This is an absurd and outrageous idea (- please don't let unthinking familiarity make it seem anything else -) that God entered into the material world and the human condition in this particular way.

Perhaps you already live and act as though it is true; or maybe you regard it as implausible (which it is); or perhaps consciously disbelieve it; or, up to this point, may not have thought much about it.

But if part of you longs to understand better this short, glorious, muddled and dramatic thing we call human life, then don't delay in getting serious about it.

Sometimes I feel like an endless tape loop. That might be because I am unimaginatively repetitive or because the message has to be said again and again. Let's then remind one another – as we probably must do throughout our lives – that what we claim happened at Christmas is of limitless and unimaginable significance.

Chuck overboard all the sentimental tosh and flim-flam, the commercial overlay, the

muddling attributions made in hymns about 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' and all the rest of it. And contemplate this: that God in Christ entered every aspect of our material universe.

That God assumed the nature of our humanity and imparted to us something of the divine; that this took place in the particularity of Bethlehem some 2000 years ago, and – as it happens - in the particularity of a male child, in the particularity of the Jewish people, in the particularity of an oppressed and occupied nation.

And that this happened once, but for "all people", all times, all places.

And, that it happened for you. The flesh that was entered is your flesh. What we remember as an historical act is mystically re-enacted in each of us. *The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.*

And through this, God remains above all things - *courteous*. God enters our world not in majesty or glitz, but discretely, and surreptitiously, and tentatively and courteously, and intimately. *So intimately.* The revelation is not forced. Freedom to respond is not only given but is inseparable from the nature of the gift being made.

Christmas just happens to be the time of year we focus on this, but the claim of the Incarnation – of God penetrating and infusing our human condition – is not confined to time.

In fact, for many, Christmas is not the most conducive time to meditate on this: we are busy, broke, and stressed. So take it as you can, and when you can.

But be sure to look out for it: in the bricks and mortar of your neighbourhood, in the expanses of our planet, in the salt in your tears, in your human relationships (the awkward ones as well as the great ones), in animal and in plant life, in your repose and in your anxiety.

Make it your business to look for the traces of God's DNA all over the place.

None of this is about church or being religious. Its implications race wildly beyond anything remotely 'religious': the consequences of the Incarnation bolt out of all quaint religious stables, just as they did out of the archetypal stable of the first Nativity.

And they know no bounds, pressing upon every aspect of life from our words and conversation, the work of our hands, our approach to power and politics, our fantasies, our loves and hatreds, our possessions and patterns of consumption, our treatment of insiders and outsiders, the exercise of our personal power and influence, our approach to the planet, its resources and the other forms of life we share it with.

Enjoy the season. Celebrate this thing 'that has come to pass'. And then follow its meaning with all the curiosity and determination you can scrape together.

Amen.

¹ "Christians are as subject to complacency as anybody else, and we can certainly settle into repetition and forget that something radical and extraordinary is being asked of us as well - that we hold to an extraordinary promise about how, from moment to moment, something enters the world and enters us, after which everything is different." Francis Spufford