

ARE YOU PARTY TO THIS CONTRACT? ⇒AN INTERLUDE ON CHRISTMAS←

The biggest festival in this country is undoubtedly Christmas. For Christians it is a time to remember the birth of Christ. For all it is a happy time of family reunion and rejoicing. For many it is the one time in the year when they come to church. We hope that they will hear the Christian message of the God who became man and opened the way to a new relationship with himself through the new covenant. We hope they will see the spiritual gifts that God has offered to those who believe in him. They do not come to hear something trivial, little beyond “the holly and the ivy”, or to hear a sermon of technical terms such as “incarnation” which are better confined to theological colleges.

The early Christians did not celebrate the birth of Christ on a particular day. They did however remember other events such as the death of Christ. And they did record, in the gospels, the story of Jesus’ birth. This story can be wonderfully retold in plays, as has happened for many centuries.

It tells of Mary, who if exposed would have faced death by stoning under Jewish law; of Joseph, willing to take the risks involved in marriage to Mary; of the support Elizabeth gave to Mary; of the journey to Bethlehem made necessary by a foreign emperor and his puppet king Herod; of birth in a cow-shed; of the angel vision of the shepherds in the countryside and their visit to the cow-shed; of the visit to Jerusalem forty days after the birth when the godly Simeon and the elderly prophetess Anna recognised the coming saviour. Then came the period of perhaps one to two years in a house in Bethlehem; the visit of an unknown number of probably politically naive astrologers with their gifts; the megalomaniac Herod’s attempt to destroy the future king by killing all the infants in Bethlehem; and finally the flight of Joseph and Mary with Jesus to Egypt as refugees (perhaps when we see refugees on television we can remember that Jesus was a refugee child).

The constraints of plays have required a definite number of astrologers on stage: traditionally three, each with one of the gifts mentioned. They have even been given names, which is useful in the script of a play. Time has demanded a shortening of the period of two years, so the visit of the astrologers has been placed in the cow-shed. Turning the astrologers into kings is an early addition. But whatever the literary licence we should not be distracted from the realities of courage, suffering, joy, vision and love which appear in the heroes of these events, or from the realities of self-interest, power, violence and murder in the rulers. Nor should we fail to see the historical and spiritual importance of what happened.

The fact that the early Christians did not celebrate Christ’s birth on a particular day has meant that we do not really know when it took place (the first reference to Christmas is in the fourth century). When the system of measuring dates from the birth of Christ was proposed by Denys le Petit in 540 AD, he did not have as much historical evidence available as we have now. We now know that king Herod died in 4 BC by our dating system, so Jesus was born a few years earlier, perhaps 6 or 7 BC.

As to the day of the year; the 25th December was the day of great pagan celebrations and it was natural that Christians should want an alternative. They chose to celebrate Christ’s birth at that time. We see today that churches with families in their congregations often have “Rainbow” parties for the children around the pagan festival of Halloween to provide an alternative celebration. The only substantial indication of the time of the year we have is that the shepherds were out in the countryside with their flocks at night. This rules out winter, snow and holly-berries!

How did a great God become a man? We don't know. But think of this. What parent does not lie on the floor to play with his young children? What parent does not kneel beside the bed of his sick child and feel the pain with him? So is it not natural that God would stoop down to assist suffering mankind? Regularly we see on television the paramedics and fire crewmen who endanger their own lives crawling into smashed vehicles and the like to comfort and rescue those who have been injured. We honour them for their greatness. Is it not natural that God should come to our world to rescue us, rather than stay aloof in "heaven"?

Real greatness is not "physical", but moral. If God is great morally, he has to become a man and suffer like the people he created. That is the real message of Christmas. And suffer he did. Christ was a refugee at two, he lived in poverty, he was hounded by the privileged and powerful with their vested religious interests, and finally he was put to death in a particularly vicious way by these leaders in the highest court in the land. They then covered up their actions by spreading lies. A familiar story? But the final victory of the world will be for truth. It will be God's victory.