

St Mary's Anglican Church, North Melbourne Christmas, 2017

Do you remember the census? The 2016 one?

I'm sure we all remember the somewhat farcical website crash and associated blame game, and yet despite it all, the ABS was able late this year to release its usual full set of data.

Hip hip, hooray!

The idea of a census has been around for a long time – we have one in tonight's reading. In this early case, the reason for the census was straight-forward – taxation. The censuses carried out in the Roman world were not benign information-gathering exercises designed to help government to allocate services to the right areas, they were loathed exercises in population counting, designed to ensure that the Emperor got what he regarded as his fair share of everyone else's money.

The most recent census here in Australia asked many questions, but one that often gets a lot of air-time is the question about religion. I don't honestly think that anyone was particularly shocked to hear that in the 2016 census, for the first time, the highest category of religious belief in Australia was "No religion"; though perhaps the fact that the number of nominal Christians had fallen by a full ten percent, from 62 to 52 percent of the population, in just five years, might have startled some.

To rub it in just a bit more, here in North Melbourne it seems that we live in one of the most Godless parts of the country – 46.6% ticked "No religion" against a national average of 29.6. Self-described Anglicans represent almost exactly 3% of the population of North Melbourne. 622 out of just over 20,000 people. Three percent.

Of course many people ticked other Christian boxes. The largest Christian group in our area are Roman Catholics, at a cracking 12%, but I won't even dare to begin to give you the decade by decade comparison statistics. They're not pretty reading.

So, why have people walked away from Christianity in such huge numbers? I don't mean changing religion, I mean walking away. Entirely.

Tonight we celebrate Christmas, and give thanks for the fact that God chose, in Jesus Christ, to become fully human, to live amongst us as one of us, to experience all that we experience: birth as a baby, growing up, going to work, striking out on his own, gathering friends about him. And of course that baby would grow up to be hated, judged, and executed by the very people to whom he had been sent. Such betrayal is all too human, all too common, even today.

In the birth of Jesus then, God chose to immerse Godself FULLY in human form.

Part of the reason that Christianity has stood the test of time so spectacularly as the largest religion in the world, is that historically, people have been able to connect with this message that in Jesus, God became just like them, and that in Jesus, God understands every one of us. There is no hiding from the blood and guts of childbirth. There is no hiding from the disruption of being a refugee from a furious Herod. There is no hiding even from the crowds in Jerusalem 30 years later, as they bay for the blood of the King of the Jews. In all of these things, God in Christ connects directly with our own experience, and for that reason, amongst others, we follow him in the way of faith.

So why now do so many walk away?

Could it just possibly have something to do with a perception, based on far too much good evidence, that most religious bodies have walked away from the very love of humanity that the baby Jesus represents? So often, the followers of Christ appear to be pretty much anti-everything that everyone else cares about. The disgraceful and scandalous responses of some in the churches to the marriage equality survey, notably the Anglican diocese of Sydney and its \$1 million donation to the No campaign; the enduring hideousness of the churches' self-justifying and defensive responses over decades and more to abuse within its ranks, both of children and of adults, especially adult women; the perception within the community that the church, and thus Christianity, is

about control rather than freedom, bondage rather than liberty, hate rather than love.

Could it just possibly be that these are some of the reasons that so many now walk away from the church founded by this poor and vulnerable baby who came to save the world?

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It need not – it must not – remain so. The church must not be a place of discrimination, abuse, control and hatred. We must reclaim it from those who have made it thus in places, and made it seem to many in the wider community to be thus universally. We must find ways once again to preach the Gospel of the Prince of Peace; to sing Alleluia because we are free; to call others to join us on the hard path of faith that leads ultimately to a God who understands us so well because he has shared in our pain and sorrow, and even in our birth and in our death.

I am not one of those who looks at the census statistics and thinks “don’t worry, it will all be ok.” It will not be ok for the church, or for our society, if we Christians do not do as Jesus himself did – if we do not become incarnate in the society of which we are a part.

Only when we reclaim the humanity of Jesus that is proclaimed by his birth, and wrap ourselves in it, will people come to respect and embrace the message we are called to proclaim – that God is love, and that his home is with the humanity he created.

- Craig D’Alton