

Christmas 2012

St Mary's Anglican Church, North Melbourne

Christmas is an utter scandal.

Oh, not for the reasons you might think. Christmas is not a scandal because of the way it has become utterly commercialised, with the most important thing being to buy the correct present, no matter what the cost either in money or in good taste. No, Christmas is not a scandal because we all eat too much and drink too much and generally over-indulge in the face of a world full of starving millions. Christmas is not even a scandal because of the way we often spend a day or two pretending that all is well in our families and relationships, even if this exercise in papering over the cracks sometimes denies real issues that need to be worked on. Or even if it blows up into one of the many scenes of domestic violence to which police will be called in the next 48 hours.

No, Christmas is not a scandal for any of these reasons; at least, not primarily so. Christmas is a scandal because of what happened over 2000 years ago. The scandal is that God became human. As John's Gospel puts it, the Word became flesh. As Luke's Gospel puts it, God was born as a fragile baby. It's a scandal because for many religious people, Spirit = good, and flesh = bad. So the Incarnation, Christmas, for some, makes no sense at all, and thus needs to be domesticated.

Particularly if we take Luke's narrative as a starting and ending point, there is the Christmas-story risk that we turn God becoming human into a mere picture-book tale of babes in manglers, shepherds in the fields, and angels in the clouds. Whereas this is only one small part of the story. Sticking with Luke's narrative, what we have most starkly is the story of a baby being born to an unmarried mother, miles from home, with her boyfriend sticking by her in tough and dangerous times. If we move to Matthew's narrative, we have that same child in similar circumstances, almost immediately becoming a refugee seeking asylum in Egypt before it is safe finally to return home many years later. But if we move to John's prosaic rendition of this story in his famous poetic text about the Word made flesh, we get to where the rubber really hits the road. The Word, God, becomes flesh, fully human. This doesn't just mean that Jesus was born as a small baby. It means that God had a body; that God knew and understood pain. It means that God knew and understood desire and lust. It means that God was capable of laughing, and crying. It means that God was able to be born, and thus that he had to die.

The scandal of Christmas is that God, relinquishing none of his divinity, fully experienced what it was like to become one of the creatures of his own creation. In Jesus, what we have is the strongest possible argument against any kind of religion that wants to deny the body its central place in human life. If God had wanted to come to Earth as an otherworldly spirit he could have chosen to do so, but he didn't. God chose a body. That body had hands and feet, eyes and ears, heart and stomach, even bowels and reproductive organs. And so when you encounter the sort of piety that wants to deny you your body, or to control it in such a way that is unnatural, I invite you to read again the stories of Christmas. God, born of a woman, became everything that we are, and yet was more besides.

In taking on our humanity in Jesus, God offers us the opportunity to lift not merely our spiritual selves, but also our physical selves into a place of redemption. When, at the other end of his life, Jesus died and rose again, that resurrection was understood to be a physical, bodily one. This is very important. The resurrection life is not merely the life of the spirit of God, but also the life of the body of that little boy whose birth we celebrate this night. And all of it is made perfect.

So, as you gather in coming days with family and friends, do not be afraid to be perhaps a little bit scandalous. Do not be afraid to overindulge a little. You're only human, and you've got a body that needs to be fed and watered, and that responds well to good and pleasurable things. But as you do so, do take a moment to remember that the reason for the season is that God is with you, laughing, perhaps crying, possibly indigestive, and even perhaps a little drunk. But remember too that he is equally in the bomb site in Damascus, in the intensive care ward of the Royal Melbourne Hospital, and sitting by the roadside with the small starving child whose mother is so malnourished that she can feed him no more.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. This little child, God with us, understands what it means to be human. And that is no scandal. It is actually rather good news.

- Craig D'Alton