

Christmas Iconoclasm and Wonder.

I'm not a big fan of "Dreaming of a white Christmas" and many of the other tunes that leave out the heart of the Christmas story and focus on the peripheries. In fact, I have been known to be quite vocal about what I call over-sentimentalising Christmas. But before I am tempted to become too self-righteous, I need to check up whether I haven't ended up "throwing the Baby out with the bathwater" (pun intended!) I need to be careful that I am not guilty of Christmas Iconoclasm.

Back in the 16th century reformation one of the sad things that happened was that the reforming church threw out a lot of the artwork and poetry that graced the churches and liturgies of the day because they considered it to be idolatrous and vanity. While it was true that there were some instances of idolatry and art-for-art's-sake instead of art-for-God's-glory, a lot of beauty and wonder was lost. Sancturies, services and liturgies became drab and functional – devoid of beauty and wonder.

And I think wonder is what is needed: awe-struck, slack-jawed, gob-smacked wonder.

Think about it: God (creator of cosmos and galaxy, lighter of suns and designer of quasars, quarks, blackholes and DNA) came into our world as a baby. Not impressed? Stop. Go back. Think about it again!

I think this ability to wonder is what Jesus was on about when He talked about becoming like a little child:

"He called a little child and had him stand among them.

3 And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:2)

Tonight I took Caleb (10) and his cousin Jemma (3) to see the Christmas lights in Lawley Street. As we drove along part of me was cynical and critical: "Santa, Reindeer and Snowflakes - what do they have to do with the real message?" But Caleb and Jemma were way ahead of me: "Wow! Oh look! It's beautiful!" And all up and down the streets were other boring adults like me who had brought their kids and were being slowed down enough to embrace the beauty of a street that usually has security patrols and guardhouses now filled with families walking and driving slowly and pointing and laughing – experiencing the most amazing thing: wonder.

The shepherds in Bethlehem got it – these rough-tough seen-it-all guys saw the angels, went to check out the Christ-child and then woke up the whole of Bethlehem: "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed (marvelled and wondered) at what the shepherds said to them. (Luke 2:17-18) They experienced wonder.

A gospel rock band, by the name of Third Day, say it very well:

"Christmas Like A Child"

I want to feel Christmas, how it used to be
With all of its wonder falling on me
This season has felt so empty, oh for quite a while
I want to feel Christmas like a child

I want to see snowflakes fall to the ground
My brothers and sisters all gathered around
Singing "Away In A Manager" as we sit by the fire
I want to feel Christmas like a child

It's been so long now, I can't say
Just when I lost my way
But I'm going back to how it was

When this day meant everything
And we spent our time remembering
The baby Child born for us

It's all about Jesus, asleep in the straw
This infant, this King, this Savior for all

So I don't need bells to be ringing
'Cause I'll join with angels singing
Gloria

And I can feel Christmas like a child
I want to feel Christmas like a child...

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0H8EFjvcyA>)

And so, wonder-filled, we throw our heads back and sing "O Come let us adore Him – Christ the Lord!"

I hope your Christmas will have all sorts of good things in it.

Family, friends, warmth, fellowship, kids, pressies and a good big helping of WONDER!

Should Christians Celebrate Christmas?

There are various concerns raised by some well-meaning Christians about celebrating Christmas:

1. The 25th of December was a pagan solstice festival that the Christians adopted to celebrate Christmas, but that the lines were always blurred between what was gospel and what was superstition.
2. Jesus probably wasn't born in December (it's winter in the Northern Hemisphere and so the shepherds would probably not have been in the fields)
3. All the "additions" to Christmas like trees, reindeers, Santa and being rewarded for being "naughty or nice" are a distraction and a dilution of the true Christmas message.
4. Christmas is so sentimentalised and over-commercialised that is all about spending and eating and people are nice to each other for a few days instead of being nice to each other all year.

These are valid concerns and I am not going to attempt to counter each one, but simply ask another question: *What would happen if all Christians everywhere boycotted Christmas?*

1. The celebration and holiday would continue, but Santa would become the solo act. Mary and Joseph would be forgotten. The angels, shepherds and wise men would be lost. The little town of Bethlehem and the Christ-child, bringer of all peace people – gone from the picture.
2. We would lose a significant opening for the gospel - already many kids in school don't know who Moses is. Take away a meaningful celebration of Christmas and there would be kids all over the world who don't even have the vaguest idea about a loving God who sent His Son into the world.
3. But the most significant of all is: We would have no time anywhere in the calendar to celebrate the truth that is at the absolute heart of the Gospel and that is that when we could not come to God, God came to us!

Paul puts it like this:

¹⁶ Beyond all question, the *mystery* of godliness is great:
He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels, was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.

The one single greatest miracle the world has ever seen is that all of God was squeezed into Mary's womb to come into our world to see it, feel it and suffer at its hands. How can we not celebrate this great truth?!? (Look at how John waxes lyrical about it in John ch.1!)

Think of a huge orchestra. Sure, there is a lot of "noise" in the way Christmas is celebrated. The commercialism jangles and the sentimentalism distorts. The additions (Santa, reindeer, etc) are out of tune instruments. The traditions (turkey, holly, etc) that accompany are often off-beat. But the central message is as clear as the beautiful voice of the soloist or the choir who bring the message to us. And the message is still crystal clear:

**"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." Luke 2:14**

When Jesus entered Jerusalem for Easter, the Pharisees told him to silence the crowd of adults and children who were cutting down Palm Branches and shouting "Hosanna." Jesus answer stopped them in their tracks: "If they keep quiet, I tell you, the stones will cry out!"

I can't but wonder... If we all stopped celebrating Christmas – would the stones cry out? I think they would!

We all know stories of wonderful and beautiful things that human beings do over Christmas time. There's the story of Christmas Day in World War I where German and British soldiers came out of the trenches, shared rations and played soccer before being driven back to war by their commanding officers. People reach out to the lonely, the children and the forgotten over Christmas time. It is as though the afterglow of the first Christmas – the coming of the Prince of Peace – still spills over into the human soul whether folk are believers or not.

I think it is valuable, important and imperative that we as Christians celebrate Christmas. I think we need to sideline Santa and the "naughty and nice" thing (which just smacks of salvation by works) and I think we need to simplify the spending and slow down on the rush-rush. I think we need to cut the "noise."

But more than that - I think we need to hug our children lots, take them to wherever carols are being sung and Christmas lights are shown and enjoy the wonder on their faces. I think we should laugh lots and make many memories. I think we should have fun giving and receiving gifts and when it's all said and done, I think we need to say "It's all because God sent His Son!"