

December 25, 2008

The comic musician Tom Lehrer has a song entitled "A Christmas Carol". This is a cynical mishmash of re-worked Christmas favourites, part of which runs like this:

*Hark the Herald Tribune sings,
Advertising wondrous things.
God rest ye merry merchants, may
you make the yuletide pay.
Angels we have heard on high
Tell us to go out and buy!*

One commentator this week remarked that Christians have lost the battle over Christmas – its basic meaning now has to do with the anticipated economic boost it brings each year. Yet, as easy as it is to be cynical about all this commercialisation of Christmas none other than the great Archangel Kevin – devout cherub that he is – has sung just the same song this year, supported by a whole host of lesser seraphs. Indeed, archangel has morphed into Santa in the distribution of some \$10 billion to spread Christmas economic cheer.

Perhaps something of Tom Lehrer's cynicism is shared by most of us at this time of the year. Something has gone wrong, is missing, has been lost. Sometimes the only thing which seems to save us at Christmas time is that the day eventually arrives, and then, finally, it is too late to do anything more. Sheer necessity forces us to make the most of what we've been able to do, and just *this* brings relief.

And yet, despite knowing that the economic and cultural weight of Christmas all verges on being too much, is there also not a corresponding cynicism to do with any attempt the Church might still make to claw back some Christmas ground? For, if we are all tired of the commercialisation of Christmas, there is also no short of weariness among those sceptical of the Church's attempts to squeeze some God-talk back into the season. Each year there is expressed in opinion pieces and letters to the editor and talk-back calls a secular longing for the true "Christmas spirit" – "Bring back the spirit of Christmas", as the song goes – but let it not be over-burdened with too much God-talk. And the protest is reasonable enough, for few of those who insist that Jesus is the "reason for the season" display much freedom in themselves from the trials of December. So, cynicism about the season's commercialism and cultural expectations meets religious scepticism at Christmas time, with the result that everyone

is left unsatisfied. There is not enough Christmas in Christmas for any of us, whether we believe or not.

I suspect that while believers might want more of "God" in Christmas, and those who don't believe but still value the season want more of the Christmas "spirit", in fact what we all feel is most missing is not "spirit" at all – whether divine or simply seasonal. Rather, we have a sense that we ourselves are not present in all that is happening here. There is something bigger "in control", and this "bigger" is not something we experience as better, for it manages to *reduce* us rather than expand us.

This is how it is for us in this "post-Christian" age.¹ By "post-Christian" is not meant that belief does not remain – for certainly it does – but rather is meant that our modern world bears the marks of Christian faith having been present, even where it imagines that it has outgrown that faith. In this post-Christian space two particular options for belief have presented themselves as apparently viable. The first is to believe "nothing", to deny authorities and traditions and beliefs. It is particularly popular as a choice, but scarcely as simple or straightforward as most of its adherents imagine. For there are very few – if any – who really believe *nothing*. We ought not be impressed by the declarations we or others might make about not being religious, or not believing in "God". It doesn't take much work to scratch around and discover that, while he or she doesn't *look* classically religious, the typical "atheist" or "agnostic" is bound by patterns and expectations and hopes and fears which determine their world just as much as the more obviously religious ones do for believers. The word "god" might not feature explicitly in these patterns and forms, but there are plenty of ghosts in our machines, pulling the levers and pressing the buttons which make us tick and fool us into believing that we are truly free, that we ourselves are somehow in control. The extraordinary stresses of Christmas should put the lie to that kind of fantasy, for just here we are shown not to be free. These stresses are many: the financial burden, the crush of time, the competition with the crowds, the awareness that this Christmas will not be what it has always been for bereavement or illness or relationship breakdown. Statistics on suicide and domestic violence at this time of the year reveal only the

¹ These thoughts developed from suggestions by Robert Jenson in his essay, "What is a post-Christian", in *The strange new word of the gospel*.

extremes of the effect of the contradictions of Christmas time; there is no shortage of lesser effects in those of us who don't feature in those tragic counts.

These non-religious, non-believers are as caught up in the pulling and tugging of the world as their religious sisters and brothers, no more, no less free. It is not, then, the absence of "God" from these systems of non-belief which is the important thing, but in fact the absence of the true and free human self. And this is what believers and non-believers have in common – that our simple beliefs and unbeliefs get not only God wrong but, more tragically, get us wrong, too.

Typically, however, we don't make such sweeping claims about not believing. If we reject the first option of believing nothing, then we are more likely to take up the second post-Christian option. This is the attempt to rehabilitate belief for today. It is usually concerned with the "ideas" of religion, and takes shape as a kind of "abstracted" Christianity which speaks of joy, hope, peace, love and such exalted things, and does so with all sincerity, yet without any real reference point.² But, apart from being quite unrealistic in its talk about what we suffer and what we need, this abstraction ends up making us responsible for the joy and love and hope – making us, that is, responsible for achieving what we've experienced year after year to be impossible.

The typical move was laid out beautifully and quite innocently in an opinion piece in *The Age* yesterday.³ In a classic abstracted, post-Christian move the author, Peter Craven, misquoted the words of the angels we heard in our gospel reading this morning, so that they now read "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will". I doubt that he knew he'd got it wrong, and in fact got it wrong to such a degree as to reverse the whole message of the angels. Before I go any further, can *you* pick the error? You don't have to "know the Bible" to pick it, but only know the meaning of the word "gospel", for there is no gospel in Craven's version.

The error is that Christmas is turned into the season of *our* good will. In fact, the gospel text reads, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward [all people]" (Luke 2.14, in the old King James Version which Craven's

² More was said about this in my sermon at Auburn UC on December 21: see the Sermons page at www.auburnuc.org.au

³ Peter Craven: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/celebrating-the-enduring-joy-of-this-season-20081223-74a7.html?page=-1>

quote reflects).⁴ It might seem a subtle point, but it is at the very point of Craven's shift of the Scripture's "good will to all people" (*gift*) to the moralistic "people of good will" (*wages*) that Christmas all falls apart for us, for this is what we suffer most of the time – to hear that *God* will bring us what we need, and then to make it our responsibility to find this thing *ourselves*.

This is no mere error of misquoting on Craven's part, for he goes on to expound his own text, writing that "the only peace is to be found in good will...", implying then that that it is *our* goodwill, reflected in our giving of gifts, which is meant here: "ultimately that's why our society ... fills those Christmas stockings". What is a word of blessing from God to all in the Christmas story becomes a limited blessing for "people of good will" in the grace-less moralism of the post-Christian world. Presumably, if I find Christmas just all too much, I am not of sufficient good will, and therefore not worthy of the peace I long for.

As *broad-spirited* and *well-intended* as is Craven's reflection on Christmas, it ultimately accuses us of being unable to bring into being what we most desperately want: "the spirit of Christmas". Instead, as he remarks, Christmas seems more like an oncoming runaway train, inevitable and devastating, and our final desire is simply to get out of its way. This abstracted belief gets us no further than deluded non-belief, for in both cases we find ourselves alone to be responsible for our well-being and our future. In both cases we remain caught in the mess of the contradiction of our desires and our realities. We are still powerless to change things, in fact *actually* to keep it all under control "*this*" Christmas, as we promised ourselves on Boxing Day last year.

What, then, are we to do? We can continue to struggle on, living with all the contradictions, hoping that in the end they'll all average out and we'll end up on top, or in the right, or healed or whole or whatever it is we think is the outcome we need.

Yet, the prophet in this morning's reading from Isaiah has a surprisingly different proposal. As keen as we are to imagine it our responsibility to set right what is wrong, to deal with the commercialism or the unbelief, the cynicism or the scepticism, to strike the right degree of peace and good will in our dealings with the world, the prophet makes an extraordinary suggestion:

⁴ Scholars now hold that a more accurate translation is , "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors" (New Revised Standard Version).

*"You who remind the LORD, take no rest,
and give him no rest
until he establishes Jerusalem
and makes it renowned throughout the
earth."*

It need not matter for us today exactly what "establish Jerusalem" meant for the people then, except to say that "save Christmas" is close enough an approximation for our purposes, for if the "spirit of Christmas" really were saved from believers and non-believers alike then *we* would all be saved, established, blessed, too.

But the important point is that those who "remind the LORD" are called not to work harder to make this establishment happen, but rather are called to work on God, to "give *him* no rest" until this work is done. *Hassle God* until peace comes, until the good will takes shape, until we *truly* are surprised and so have something to celebrate. "Give God no rest" until he sets us right. This is an unexpected thought. Piety almost forbids it but, mercifully, the Scriptures do not suffer from the same unholy squeamishness as those who read them. "Remind God that this we are *his* work and not our own."

As I finished this sermon last night – much later than I ought to have, and fortified by an immoderate amount of 12-year-old tawny – I had playing on loop in the background an extraordinary rendition of the Latin chant "O magnum mysterium".⁵ An English translation might run:

*O great mystery,
and wonderful sacrament,
that animals should see the new-
born Lord,
lying in a manger!
Blessed is the Virgin whose womb
was worthy to bear
Christ the Lord.
Alleluia!*

The *magnum mysterium* – the great mystery – is not something unknown and unattainable but the meeting of the world with God in that delicate and fragile creature laid in the manger, to become a mature human being like any one of us, and yet to be the surprising, incomprehensible presence of a life lived without cynicism or scepticism. Suffering will come, yes, on account of the very innocence and freedom Jesus will embody, but it will be a suffering of innocence such that no other has known. And it will bring a possibility of healing which our suffering does not.

Whatever might be said of the Christmas story, there is no cynicism or scepticism in the story we've heard in today's gospel reading. For here

we find not the frustration of a promise we cannot fulfil ourselves but the simple account of a gift which was seen by those standing about to be just what was needed, provided by the only one who could have provided it.

The very telling of the story of such a life – here in its beginnings - ought to be reason enough to give thanks, and impetus for us to give God no rest until he should free us from cynicism and scepticism and give *us* peace, too.

As this Christmas continues to unfold today and tomorrow and the next day, may some small measure of God's peace and good will toward us be discovered in what is happening around us, that we might be filled where we are empty, and join with the angels in a quiet alleluia.

Amen.

⁵ By the Australian choir *Cantillation*.