

CHRISTMAS -2021

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Lk 2:1-14

One of the catch phrases of our times is, "I am spiritual but not religious." I have often wondered what this means and whether it partly explains why Christmas without Christ is the norm for most of Western civilisation.

As a seminarian in the late 1950's and early 60's, the push from the progressive theologians was to 'demythologise' the Scriptures. They said that modern people should no longer be expected to believe in miracles, instant healings or hold beliefs such as the Virgin birth of Jesus, his bodily resurrection, heaven and hell or the final judgement. It was OK to have a few shepherds camping out in fields but no rubbish like angelic choirs. A couple of wise men is fine but forget about bright stars wandering across the sky. They regarded such things as irrelevant candy floss which insults modern intelligence. This seems to be spiritual but not religious because the supernatural is 'cancelled.'

Being spiritual but not religious means that Christian beliefs that are irrational should be discarded. Once the supernatural element of religion has been stripped away what is left is not much more than Christians having good table manners, being polite, non-judgemental, inclusive, caring and being a social justice or climate change warrior. In 2017 the traditional Nativity scene in the Vatican's St Peter's Square also had a tableau which comprised of images portraying the corporal works of mercy. These are to feed the hungry, satisfy the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick and imprisoned and bury the dead. The tableau created a furore from some people because of nudity and the 'grotesqueness of the images.' For others the objection was that the way the tableau was set up made it difficult to see the nativity scene behind it.

The acts of mercy are important but this Vatican nativity scene unintentionally revealed what is left of Christianity when the supernatural is stripped away. Once heaven is discarded as the destination of a disciple, we have no need for a Saviour. We can save ourselves by being decent people who have turned respectability into a secular spiritual tradition.

A real religion urges us to love God before we love our neighbour. God comes first. Real religion urges us to believe that God takes the initiative in all things and does indeed interact with the world in earthquake, wind fire and through an angel who announces a miraculous birth of a child who was born in Palestine in the reign of Augustus Caesar and lives today in bread and wine. This is the most single truth that in his Christmas poem, Sir John Betjeman says that nothing else can be compared to it.

What we are celebrating today is the reason Christmas exists, and this is, that Jesus came down from heaven to bear witness to the Truth. This is why we celebrate this day. He came to show us, not just tell us, that Truth comes from outside the world and gives meaning to it. We don't make up truth which can be different for different people. Truth comes from God

and it is absolute and unchanging. We must seek this Truth, embrace it, believe it and allow it to shape our lives.

If Jesus is the key witness to the Truth then what we are challenged to do is discover what it is that he witnesses. This means reading, reflecting and praying over the accounts of his witnesses in the four gospels and hearing the witness of Jesus through them. It is this truth that we encounter that will set us free because we will discover God's truth that invites us to be obedient to it.

If we are to be religious as well as spiritual, whatever else we celebrate today, let us thank God for the birth of Jesus, God's Word made flesh who came to share our fragile life and within it bore witness to the Truth.

Happy Christmas

Msgr Harry
Dec 2021