

RECLAIMING CHRISTMAS

Christmas Day, 2013 – John 1:1-14

The Waterloo Region Record ran an article last Saturday whose headline was “Christmas viewed by many as cultural event: Survey finds only half of Americans consider celebration religious.” It wasn’t much of an article: the headline contained most of the content of the piece, but it prompted two thoughts for me. The first was that if the survey had been taken in Canada, a much-less-religious culture than the culture of the United States, the statistics would have indicated that less than half of Canadians consider Christmas to be a religious festival. The second was that perhaps it is time for Christians to reclaim Christmas from popular culture by identifying for ourselves and for others where Christmas sits in the landscape of faith. Notice I haven’t said anything about “the true meaning of Christmas” – a phrase that was common 30 or 40 years ago when it first began occurring to people that Christmas was a cultural event, not a religious observance. The slogan “Jesus is the Reason for the season” was another protest against the commodification of Christmas. Christmas means what it means, and no amount of scolding or protest from the Christian faith community can change its meaning. We may, however, be able to enhance its meaning by trying to answer for ourselves how our understanding of Christmas relates to the world around us – and then sharing that understanding.

Interestingly, Scripture itself is quite helpful in this pursuit. On Christmas Eve, we always read Jesus’ birth narrative from Luke’s Gospel, an account rich with the very imagery that has inspired many of the secular icons we associate with Christmas as a cultural event: the stable; the Christ Child in a manger, as opposed to a cradle; shepherds; angels. The story has power, and that power is consumed by people of faith and people of no faith. For whatever reason, humans love myth, and Luke’s narrative of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem fills the bill. But Luke uses one word that beckons our going deeper – the word “sign”. Initially, the reference is to how the shepherds will be able to find Baby Jesus: he will be “lying in a manger”. But when that same birth narrative has Mary “treasuring and pondering” the message of the angels and shepherds, and then the shepherds “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen,” it suggests that Jesus’ birth itself is a sign; that those who have longed for and waited for some indication that we are not alone, that this is God’s world, can finally discern the hand of God at work in the person of Jesus. The birth of this insight to people of faith probably did not occur at the time of Jesus’ birth, but without question, it inspired Luke’s story which only accrues with meaning as we treasure and ponder, glorify and praise the gospel embodied in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In this sense, Jesus’ birth story is a sign of the birth of faith as much as it is the birth of the Saviour.

Our Gospel this morning is also helpful in providing us with a way of communicating the significance of Christmas. John the Evangelist, for all of the many influences and filters he uses in interpreting who Jesus was and is, does have a certain eloquence when he writes of Jesus as the Word of God. Again, for seekers of a truth that will transform the cloud of unknowing into understanding and then faith concerning where is God in our world, John nails it. Jesus is God’s Word who embodies, first of all, faith in a Creator who is at one with creation and at one with humans who, in Jesus’ understanding are “children of God”. But Jesus also embodies unconditional love and solidarity with humanity – most beautifully revealed in his choosing the way of the Cross; Jesus embodies grace and mercy – most beautifully revealed in his teaching and healing ministry; Jesus embodies justice and peace – most beautifully revealed in his continued advocacy on behalf of those who are poor and oppressed, and his condemnation of those who cause poverty and oppression.

Those of you who have been present for some of my Advent sermons know of my admiration for our new Pope, firm in his stand for the gospel over and above all the competing claims of Catholic dogma and doctrine. When he makes proclamations, such as his recent exhortation the Joy of the Gospel, he is in apostolic succession with the first apostles, more so than will other popes past and (we can say right now) present. He is beginning to do with the Church what the whole faith community can do with Christmas – use it as a base for recalling our first principles of love, mercy, truth, peace, justice, grace, forgiveness, promise, hope, and fulfillment.

Christmas is a celebration for Christians of the Word of God finding home in our world through people whose faith leads them to proclaim all of these things; to proclaim that, yes, this *is* God’s world after all; that, yes, we are still the children of God, all of our sin and sinfulness notwithstanding; that yes, we are

not without a moral and spiritual compass, because we have received these gifts in the proclamation of Jesus Christ.

John says it most eloquently, and it is a statement we can make our own in our Postmodern, post-Christian world. God's Word lives among us, because we have seen its glory, the glory as of Jesus of Nazareth and his gospel, full of grace and truth.