

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Season's Greetings

For Christians, the first half of the calendar year is a time of commemoration, beginning with the foretelling of Christ's coming at Advent and continuing through the great events of his birth, death and resurrection. From there, the liturgical story goes on to Pentecost and culminates in the great feast of the Trinity, which then marks out the rest of the year. It is a cycle with which we are all familiar, and which the liturgical zealots have not succeeded in dislodging, at least not among Anglicans. Roman Catholics are less fortunate, being stuck with so-called 'ordinary time' instead of the Trinity, which has made a comeback among us after very nearly being swallowed up in an ongoing Pentecost.

The liturgical calendar is in many respects a matter of indifference, and we are reminded in the New Testament not to make a fuss over the fact that some people observe certain days for particular reasons, whilst others do not. We know that much of it is overlaid on top of pagan practices which are nowadays mostly forgotten, but which linger on here and there. For example, Christmas has no biblical justification, and the continuing presence of such things as Santa Claus and the Yule tree serve to remind us of the pre-Christian rock from which it was hewn in late antiquity. Nobody knows when Jesus was born, and every once in a while somebody makes a case for altering the date, if only to avoid the crass commercialism which has now become an essential feature of our consumer economy. But they are unlikely to get very far, and Christmas seems to be firmly embedded in the popular consciousness, not only as a secular feast, but often as the one time in the year when people make the effort to get to church and sing the old carols over and over again.

Easter has a much better biblical pedigree, being clearly related to the Jewish Passover and falling at a time of year when we can be fairly certain that Jesus was crucified, even if a choice of dates has to be made between AD30 and AD33. Even the most non-liturgical churches find it hard to avoid celebrating it, though curiously enough, the name Easter (the Anglo-Saxon goddess of the

East) survives as a reminder of its pagan connections in early England. Bunnies and eggs in abundance tell us that here we are dealing with an ancient fertility rite, although it is fair to say that few people are now aware of that aspect of it. In between, there are any number of minor festivals which combine the sacred and secular—2 February, for example, known popularly as Candlemas and commemorating the purification of the Virgin Mary after childbirth, is remembered in the USA as ‘groundhog day’, when the little rodent is supposed to emerge and see its shadow for the first time, heralding an eventual end to winter. It just so happens that in northern climes, the beginning of February is when the days start to grow visibly longer, and so the feast probably goes back to ancient folk practices which have now been lost beyond recall.

Most of us are vaguely aware of this sort of thing, and it is doubtless one reason why convinced Christians are slow to stand up in defence of Christian symbolism connected with these events. For many years now there has been a creeping move to de-Christianize the major festivals by using such slogans as ‘season’s greetings’ or ‘happy holidays’, whatever those anodyne expressions are supposed to mean. They would do just as well for any time of the year after all, and you more or less have to be a Christian in order to decode them properly. But recently there seems to have been a curious backlash all over the English-speaking world. Voices can now be heard insisting that Christ should be put back into Christmas, and no doubt Easter will receive similar treatment in due course. In a world where nobody would dare wish Muslims ‘season’s greetings’ for any of their celebrations, for fear of the offence it would cause, some Christians seem to want to reclaim the most important moments in the Christian liturgical year, which are still recognized and celebrated as such, in spite of the stifling blanket of political correctness which has descended on us all.

It has been (quite rightly) pointed out by people like Lord Carey that members of other faith communities do not expect Christians to conceal their beliefs in public; on the contrary, they are quite prepared to see us celebrate them because, as they see it, freedom for one religious group means freedom for all. They do not want Christianity to disappear from view, because then their own beliefs will also come under attack. Anyone who doubts this, need only look at secularized France, where the strict separation of church and state is also taken to mean that Muslim girls cannot wear distinctive dress at school. The people who oppose Christian symbolism are not fanatical imams or lamas, but

fanatical post-Christian agnostics who assume that they have a right to speak for the majority of the population. Even in supposedly secular Britain, more than seventy percent of the population claims to be Christian, whilst only fifteen percent say they have no religion, which effectively means that we are being told what to do by a bossy minority—hardly a democratic situation!

This minority gets away with it at least partly because convinced Christians are of two minds on the subject and tend to think that it is a battle not worth fighting. But like it or not, the great festivals are times when the church still reaches out to the wider community, and if we lose that we shall lose a precious bridge to the unevangelised. True believers are welcome to go to bed early on Christmas Eve if they wish to, but our churches are still likely to be filled with casual visitors to a degree unknown at other times, apart from weddings and funerals.

Defending the Christian calendar is not something which will make much difference to regular churchgoers, but it can be an important witness to those whose links with the Christian faith are otherwise minimal to non-existent. In this connection, we have a duty to resist the creeping tendency to use BCE ('before the common era') and CE ('common era') as replacements for the politically incorrect 'before Christ' and 'anno Domini'. It is true that the usual arguments apply. Dionysius Exiguus, who invented Christian dating in the sixth century got the year of Christ's birth wrong, and the system is completely unknown to the Bible. For centuries, the church used the Roman calendar, replacing it on occasion with another one which started from a supposed creation in 5508BC. Jews still use a variant form of this calendar, though they do not push creation back quite as far. The real beauty of the Christian dating system, however, and one of the main reasons why it has now been adopted universally, is that it provides for an infinite extension backwards. A creation calendar has to have a starting-point and can hardly conceive of anything happening before that, and Muslims also find difficulty in reckoning anything that occurred before the birth of Islam in AD622, since it hardly matters to them what went on in those days!

Christians however, need a BC, because the coming of Christ was not the beginning of our consciousness, but the culmination of a centuries-old development which had been preparing for that great event. It may be inconvenient to have to count backwards, but at least we can keep on going

into the distant past, and this ability makes our calendar more user-friendly than its chief rivals. As Christians, we hold onto it not because of its convenience but because of the word of prophecy which foretold the coming of Christ long before it actually occurred—the whole of earlier history is, in effect, a countdown to that glorious event. The ‘common era’ syndrome would render that symbolism meaningless, and take away a witness to the most fundamental aspect of our faith as Christians. It would, in fact, make Christmas even more meaningless than ‘happy holidays’ does, because it would remove the explanation for the change of eras at that time. The reason we have a ‘common era’ now is that Christ came at that point in time, and his message is one of universal import. Even the atheists and agnostics among us are forced to bow the knee to him at this point and that, too, is a powerful witness to the sovereignty of Christ over all creation.

Ultimately, what lies behind the latest argument over all this is the freedom to preach the Gospel. If we cannot claim our own festivals and use our own dating system, not because they have been abandoned but because they have been neutered, then it follows that our right to be who we are has been neutered as well. Churches are then useful only to the extent that they are community centres, and preaching the gospel must give way to inter-faith dialogue and reconciliation. As always, there is something to be said for these things—nobody wants to ignore issues of social justice, nor do we want to encourage bad relations with religious minorities. But such things cannot be allowed to suppress the Christian message. When all is said and done, we believe that Christ is the Saviour of every human being, and to deny people of other religions the opportunity to hear about him and receive him into their lives is an act of cruelty, not of kindness. The sad truth is that our own church leaders and many of our supposed people also need to receive Christ into their lives. The agnostics get as far as they do because so many professing Christians are what the Puritans would have called ‘false professors’—people who made the claims but whose lives deny the reality of Christ’s presence. We cannot point the finger at others; Christian witness is the responsibility of church members, not of others, and it is here that the cry of alarm must be sounded. Only then will ‘season’s greetings’ give way to ‘Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!’

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