



Christianity and Salvation

There is a saying about well-intentioned but misguided friends that takes on a special meaning this time of year: "God save me from my friends — I can protect myself from my enemies." And no, I don't mean friends or even family members who might better have given to charity the money they have spent on gifts for you they think are perfectly charming, but from which you derive no pleasure and for which you can find no use. No, I mean the well-intentioned friends of Christ who launch an unofficial campaign each year to "Keep Christ in Christmas."



I am not sure Christ and Christmas have much to do with each other anymore. I refer, of course, to Christmas as it is seen in and generally known to the world, the "season to be jolly," the season of getting and giving, of holiday this and yuletide that, a time for "snow and mistletoe and presents on the tree." Yes, it is easy to lose sight of the Savior in a manger in the midst of all that.

But I also believe many sincere and devout Christians miss the point as well by making the Christmas story itself pretty and charming and overly sentimental. So charmed are we by the thought of "little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay," that we might almost think that the birth in a stable or a cave must have been kind of a fun time for the Holy Family, much as we might enjoy "roughing it" in the wilderness on a weekend camping trip. Yet for all our complaints about doctors and hospitals, I suspect that the number of women who would willingly give birth "away in a manger" and the number of fathers who would like to be there with them is extremely small.

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And without buses, trains, cars, or planes, the trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem must have been grueling. The birth of a child is a strenuous and complicated enough affair without Caesar mucking it up with his decree that "all the world must be enrolled," each in the city of his ancestors. It has often been noted that we find no words attributed to Saint Joseph anywhere in Scripture — or anywhere else for that matter. If he was as quiet as he appears in the pages of the New Testament it is probably a good thing. And while he no doubt said something on the journey with his wife as she was about to give birth, it is no doubt a good thing that his words went unreported. Flesh and blood can suffer only so much in silence, even for one as exceptionally holy as the foster-father of Jesus. It is possible that at least some of what he had to say on that trek to Bethlehem may not have been fit for pious ears at Sunday morning worship. We can only speculate. But many of us, anyway, would likely have been cursing Caesar every step of the way.

Then there were those shepherds in the field, "communing with nature," we may be inclined to say — as though we would find it thoroughly charming to spend our nights and days in the field, tending sheep in all kinds of weather — rainy days, damp, miserable, teeth chattering nights, watching for wolves that might at any time attack our flocks. Yes, I'm sure we'd be delighted to spend our nights that way.



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And then to be scared out of our wits by an angel suddenly appearing in our midst! No wonder the angel, as recorded in the Gospel of Saint Luke, found it necessary to advise the shepherds to "Fear not." And then came the good news: "For, this day is born to you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David."

A Savior? Were the Shepherds aware of a promised Savior? Did they know they were in need of one? If they had lived in our time, they might have read books of "pop" Christianity, like *I'm OK, You're OK*, and decided that while some truly decadent souls may be in need of a Savior, they themselves were like, okay, man.

"And this shall be a sign unto you. You will find the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger." Here I find interesting a point made long ago by Father Leonard Feeney in a chapter on "Christmas and Salvation" in a book called *Bread of Life*. "When the angels said to the shepherds, 'Go over to Bethlehem!' they did not mean, 'Go over and commune with nature,'" Father Feeney said. Nor did the angels suggest the shepherds merely turn toward Bethlehem as a Muslim would toward Mecca. "They did not say, 'Close your eyes and imagine what profound depths there are in you.'" No, that might be the reaction of some adherents of one or more of today's New Age versions of Christianity. Or it might be the response of the indifferent who have decided that the inn is better than the road to Salvation and the couch in front of the TV set is a finer, more comfortable place than a pew in front of a tabernacle.

Christianity is the incarnational religion. The coming of Christ was accompanied by signs and wonders, but the coming itself was more than an epiphany, a vision to be seen and known by a few. It was and is "a great joy that shall be to all people." The Word became flesh at a moment in time and was born in a particular place. The shepherds went in haste to find not a Christmas card baby with an artist's pious halo over his crib, but to see, as agnostic-turned-Christian Malcolm Muggeridge put it, "a real baby, wrinkled and wizened and full of wind, as babies are." In faith, they searched and found what they were told they would find — the living, breathing, flesh-and-blood infant who would be their own and the world's Savior, lying in, of all things, a manger.

A manger is a feeding trough for animals. Jesus would become the food of our Salvation. "I am the bread of life," he said. "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world." (John, 6:48, 51-52)

Yet the Scriptures speak to us of two different kinds of bread. "Man does not live by bread alone," Jesus told Satan in the desert, "but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." We live at a time when men and women who bear the name "Christian" have become remarkably adept at ignoring a great many words that come "from the mouth of God." Ours is a time when the Episcopalians in New Hampshire, jokingly referred to as "God's frozen people," now have as their bishop a homosexual advocate of same-sex "marriage." Men and women who go to church each Sunday and even participate in various church ministries are among the vocal defenders of the legal "right" to kill pre-born babies as a matter of personal "choice." And many of the most devout and sincere Christians among us see no contradiction in singing the praises of "peace on earth" while supporting their country's bombing and killing of people in nations that have neither attacked nor threatened to attack us.

And in the midst of all this we have an ostensible celebration of Christ's birth that Muggeridge more or less accurately described as a "mighty exercise in salesmanship, a gala occasion in the great contemporary cult of consumption, an act of worship directed towards our latest deity-the Gross



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National Product."

But we may be tempted to overreact in assessing that "mighty exercise in salesmanship." Salesmen are useful, after all, and, like the rest of us, they have to make a living. We may well wonder what Christ must think of this event we call Christmas, which has become less a holy day and increasingly a holiday. We may be tempted to throw up our hands in despair and reject the entire madhouse mess of it. But then we might forget the entire meaning of the Incarnation.

The words of Muggeridge quoted here are from his 1972 book, *Jesus: The Man Who Lives*. In it, he reflected on the birth and death of the Savior in a way that goes well beyond the mere rejection of commercialism. "If God chose to become incarnate as Jesus," Muggeridge wrote, "then his birth, whatever marvels may have accompanied it, must have had the same characteristics as any other; just as on the Cross, the suffering of the man into whom the Bethlehem child grew must have been of the same nature as that of the two delinquents crucified beside him. Otherwise, Jesus's humanity would have been a fraud.... As man alone, Jesus could not have saved us; as God alone, he would not. Incarnate, he could and did."

In all the noise and clatter about Christmas and reindeer, jolly old Saint Nick and gifts "that keep on giving," it is good to remember that Christmas is about salvation. That is the real gift that keeps on giving. And it is far too precious to waste.



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