

## **THE REAL MEANING OF CHRISTMAS**

Baptist Times 22 December 2005

Unlike Matthew, John does not tell of the wise men and star; and unlike Luke he does not tell of the angels and the shepherds. Indeed, he does not even mention the virgin birth. But he does say that “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (1.14), and in so doing he gets to the heart of the Christmas story.

Sadly, time and again people miss out on the heart of the Christmas story. For many the word Christmas conjures up parties and dances, pantomimes and nativity plays, Christmas trees with fairy lights, holly and mistletoe, Christmas stockings and presents, Christmas cards and letters, Santa Claus and reindeer, frost and snow, Christmas pudding and mince pies, Christmas dinner with turkey and Brussel sprouts. But these are but the trimmings. Strange as it may seem, in those parts of the world where these trimmings are not present, Christmas is celebrated with a good deal more fervour and enthusiasm than here. For Christmas is not about mistletoe, Christmas trees and turkeys – as John points out, it is about the Word becoming flesh and living among us.

But if Christmas is not about the secular trimmings, nor is it about the religious ‘trimmings’. The heart of the Christmas story is not about angels appearing to shepherds, or about wise men following a star; it's not even about a baby born of a virgin. Do not get me wrong: I believe that angels did appear to shepherds; I believe that there was a star that guided wise men; I believe that Jesus was born of a virgin. But none of these events is essential to Christmas. Christmas would still be Christmas had there been no shepherds, had there been no wise men; nor dare I say it, had there been no Virgin Birth. The wonder of Christmas is that God became man – “the Word became flesh. Here is the true wonder.

Sadly, the true meaning of Christmas can become lost even to Christian people. The distinguished German Lutheran bishop, Hans Lilje, told of how in a Nazi prison in 1944 he celebrated Christmas with two fellow prisoners about to be executed: “It is possible for the candles and lights to blind our eyes, so that we can no longer see the essential element in Christmas; but the people who ‘walk in darkness’ can perhaps see it better than all who see only the lights of the earth”. Stripped of all the ‘trimmings’ John’s account of the incarnation gets to the heart of the Christmas story. And in so doing, he challenges us to respond in faith. For to all who receive the Christ, who believe in his name, he gives power to become children of God (1.12). Faith it has been said is the act of “grasping reality” – and the reality in question is Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, the Word made flesh. It is only then with the eye of faith that we can pierce the fog of illusion and see the true wonder of the Christmas story..

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