



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Mass of Christmas Day (25th December) 2024

Briefly, on the *Teletext* a couple of weeks ago, there was a report of a Vicar, who had chosen at a Year five/Year six assembly to inform his audience that there was no such person as Father Christmas. According to the account, children were sobbing in their places as he imposed the disillusion on them. I was reminded of that scene from *The Sound of Music* where, at dinner, Maria induces lachrymose guilt in the Von Trap children by disingenuously thanking them for what she terms as the precious gift, which everyone except the children's father knew to be a frog they had left in her pocket.

Of course, the priest was incorrect in his denial of the existence of Father Christmas, since the figure we have today is an extrapolation from a very real figure of the third and fourth centuries; and that might have proved a less distressing line of reflexion for the children; but what do I know?

At the same time, although the time and the place were misjudged, the priest was, none-the-less, onto something. Over quite a long time, there has developed what we might term a British cultural Christmas. In this version of the festival, the distinction in most people's minds between the substance of Faith, embodied in the celebration and the assorted accretions, which have joined themselves to it. They have all become part of a winter wonderland of magical experience for children; and so, of course, as those children grow up and leave behind their expectations of Father Christmas, with him they leave behind Jesus in His Crib.

It is not only at Christmas we see this trend of, so to speak, "culturalising" the Christian religion. Some years ago a case came before the European Court of Human Rights regarding the placing of Crucifixes in Italian schools. The practice had been challenged unsuccessfully in the domestic tribunals and so an appeal was made to Europe. The argument successfully advanced by the Italian government in defence of its position was that the Crucifixes were part of the cultural inheritance of the country.

Whilst it might have seemed like a triumph for the Crucifixes, it was something of a Pyrrhic Victory: the objects had, in the process, lost much of their significance, embodying more the history of the nation than the truth of Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross: saying, "This is whence we came," without implying that, "This is where we are now."

All of this serves subtly to contain and neutralise the power of our religious belief. The outward forms are recast as trappings of national identity, keeping hold of remnants of the past, which still have some temporal utility in the present.

However, for us, Christmas does not point to a past when people believed in God, but to a present when God is amongst us and, we pray, born in us today, as the carol puts it, that we might be signs of that divine Presence in the world.

Furthermore, Christmas is not about who we are, but about whom God wishes us to become. The Incarnation shines a light into the darkness of earthly life - revealing amongst other things that there is a darkness to earthly life. It asks God to cast out our sin and enter in, that we - individuals and communities - might be different from - better than - we are.

When the Cribs are packed away and Santa Claus has returned to the North Pole, Jesus will remain with us, amongst us, shining a light on the world.