

Christmas Midnight 2006

Isaiah 52 vv 7-10, Hebrews 1 vv 1-12, John 1 vv 1-14.

December's newspapers have been full of stories about the downgrading of Christmas. Apparently, the traditional British Christmas is under threat from multiculturalism, excessive regulation, too much "health and safety" and political correctness. These stories follow through from the controversy in the Autumn about a Moslem classroom assistant who insisted on wearing a burka in school and a Christian airline worker who wanted to wear a cross to work. The suspicion behind these debates is that our society is being transformed against the will of many of us. Christianity, this country's official religion for 1,000 years, is being marginalised, whereas the religions of immigrant groups are asserting themselves. There is the further suspicion that government, and especially local government, is actively promoting the cultures of various immigrant groups, perhaps even turning a blind eye to a certain amount of law-breaking on the part of the ethnic minorities, while quietly putting the squeeze on institutional Christianity and other aspects of our traditional way of life.

You can catch diseases from reindeer. Candles are a fire hazard. Excessive incense contravenes European directives on air purity. Christmas tree lights may cause electrical fires and you can easily trip over the flex. Putting up paper chains is dangerous, especially if you have a few drinks before balancing on a chair on top of the filing cabinet to pin them to the office ceiling. Nobody wants an accident. On the other hand, there is nothing we can do without risk. So "health and safety" can always be given as a reason for prohibiting or regulating everything we do.

Add in the compensation culture. What you want to do might not be illegal, but you could be sued if someone hurts themselves on your premises even if it is their own silly fault. You are not breaking any laws, but, unless you have ticked all the right boxes, the insurance company might not pay out.

If someone gets a bit too amorous under the mistletoe at the office party, the employer might find himself in court for permitting sexual harassment. Given our contemporary obsession with paedophilia, Santa and every elf in his grotto, as well as all the adult helpers at the children's Christmas party, need to be CRB checked.

The Licensing Act makes things much easier for city centre pubs selling alcohol to binge drinkers well into the wee small hours, but it makes it impossible for the church book shop to sell a bottle of communion wine to the local vicar and requires anyone arranging a Christmas concert or a party open to the public or a carol singing event to fill in a 20 page form for the local council and, in some circumstances, to pay a hefty fee as well.

Then there is political correctness. We can all agree that people should not be gratuitously offended. The trouble is that it is almost impossible to do anything without offending someone. So the need not to give offence justifies council officers and policemen in interfering in everything from the display of the St George's flag during the World Cup to the sale of golliwogs in toyshops. Petty officials have a field day with Christmas. The very name Christmas might offend non-Christians. So call it "Winterval". Avoid depictions of Mary, Joseph, shepherds, wise men and especially the baby Jesus in any Christmas lights or

tableaux. Tell your staff to say “Season’s greetings” rather than “Merry Christmas”. Don’t allow the display of Christmas cards – especially the ones with a religious message.

Many of these precautions are not required by law. Neither are they official policy. Given the risk of litigation, however, and the amount of interference businesses and voluntary organisations have to put up with from officialdom these days, it is no wonder that people err on the side of caution. The easiest way to avoid prosecution, official interference or criticism is to do nothing. Cancel the office party. Don’t bother to arrange a carol singing event. Make sure any decorations you put up are bland and devoid of all Christian significance.

Many of the problems regarding our traditional Christmas are part of the wider problem of an over-regulated society. I am sure, however, that there really is, in some official circles, an anti-Christian agenda. Moslems, Jews, Sikhs etc tell us that they have no problem with us celebrating Christmas. In fact, they expect us to. They expect to be free to celebrate their religious festivals openly and publicly and they see no problem in Christians celebrating their faith with big public displays. In fact, many immigrants are surprised that in this so-called Christian country relatively few Christians actually do practise their religion openly. The pressure for Winterval and nativity-scene-free Christmas lights comes from those forces in government and local government who would like Britain to become a secular society – that is one in which religion is confined to the heart and home and has no influence on public policy and is not part of our shared national values. Religion, for these people, is a private matter which must not be allowed to impinge on the public realm.

There is talk of a white, Christian, backlash. And here we have to be very careful. When I hear the British National Party claiming to be standing for traditional Christian values, I get very nervous. If we are Christians, we have no time at all for violence against ethnic minorities or people of other faiths. If we are Christians, we do not persecute other religious beliefs. If we are Christians, we defend other people’s right to practise their religion, even while we try to win them for Christ by our love - love, not coercion.

In September I was in the Rusholme district of Manchester where there were a number of Moslem women on the streets wearing the full length burka. They did not worry me half so much as the young white guy, well over six feet tall, who stopped me and asked for money! When I went jogging, however, in just a pair of shorts, someone shouted after me, “Put a top on” and I couldn’t help thinking that if it is right for me to respect other people’s right to dress the way they want, they should respect my right to dress the way I want.

Christianity is not a white man’s religion. All the first Christians were Jews. Then there were quite a lot of Asian Christians and a handful of Africans. It was relatively late that the Gospel first reached Europe. I do not see how there could have been any English Christians in the first 500 years of Christianity. There wasn’t any England. Most Christians in the world today are not white and many white people are not Christians. As long ago as the first century, St Paul made it clear that racial distinctions have no place in the Church. The Church is made up of people of all races and we are all one in Christ. In fact, in modern Britain, the churches which are made up predominantly of black people are generally much

livelier than the predominantly white churches. I think of St Mary's Strood where a small, faithful, mainly white, congregation eventually had to give up and merge with St Nicholas and their building is now used by a mainly black congregation. Many black church members go to church every Sunday. They often tithe – give a tenth of their income to the Church – and try to live by traditional Christian values all the week. It has been pointed out that, even in the Church of England, it is our two non-white diocesan bishops who have been most outspoken in defending the place of Christianity in British public life.

England has a thousand year old Christian heritage and we should be very thankful to God for the place Christianity has in our national life and our history, but it would be quite untrue to say that England has always behaved in a Christian way or that English Christianity is any more than a small part of the rich tapestry made up of 2,000 years of Christian worship, mission and service all over the world.

Coming back to our traditional Christmas, many Christians have been unhappy for centuries about the way the birth of Jesus has come to be celebrated with greed, drunkenness, consumerism and wild partying. There have always been the puritans who have wanted to abolish or at least to downplay the cards and presents, the gargantuan meals and overflowing glasses, in favour of a sober celebration of the birth of God Incarnate.

We could also ask ourselves how much of our so-called traditional Christmas has anything to do with the birth of Jesus? There aren't many reindeer in Bethlehem, or snowmen, or poinsettias. Flashing electric lights hadn't been invented in the first century. Mary and Joseph wouldn't have eaten our Christmas dinner even if it had been available to them. It isn't kosher. Santa Claus and the Christmas tree do have their origins in Christian tradition, but how many people realise that or could say what those origins are?

So a Christian backlash? If we want a more assertive Christianity, we have to make up our minds as to what Christianity really is. It is certainly not anti-immigrant or anti—non-white. It is not about persecuting or placing restrictions on adherents of non-Christian religions. Christianity and English culture share 1,000 years of history, but they are not necessarily the same thing. Standing up for Jesus is not the same thing as standing up for a particular kind of Englishness. There was a public school chaplain who used to tell the boys that being a Christian was the same thing as being an English gentlemen. It ain't necessarily so.

Being nice does not equal being a Christian. Plenty of nice people are not Christians and quite a lot of Christians are not nice people.

So – if you want to make a stand for Jesus – what do you have to do? Wear a cross to work? Well, maybe, but that really is a side issue. First and foremost, a Christian is a person who believes in God in Jesus Christ.

If you really believe in God in Jesus Christ, God will fill your thoughts. You will want to worship Him, praise Him and love Him with all your heart. If you want to identify yourself as a Christian, you will pray every day and you will come to church regularly and frequently to worship God, to receive Jesus in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, to hear His holy

Word and to enjoy fellowship with other Christians. You will not make a public show of this, but neither will you be shamefaced. If people want to know why you worship, you will confidently give them a reason for the hope that is in you.

If you really want England to be a Christian country, you will be loyal to Christ's Church and support her with your presence, your money, your time and your talents. The Church is the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit and she, His Bride, is the human organisation charged by God to establish His Kingdom on earth. Neglect the Church to the extent that she dies and England is finished as a Christian country.

If you want this to be a Christian country, you will try to order your personal life on Christian principles. Basically that means that the way you live – your family life, your work, your recreation – will be based on the two commandments which Jesus says summarise God's Law. You will base your life on the twin pillars of loving God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself. If you love, you will fulfil the Law, because loving people don't cheat, lie or steal and they do try to help other people.

If you want this to be a Christian country, you will support government and business when it is acting in a Christian way and you will speak out, withhold support, use your vote, when people in power act in opposition to Christian principles.

If you believe that England should be a Christian country, you will make sure you pass on your faith to your children and grandchildren, bringing them to Church and Sunday school, telling them the Bible stories, praying with them and teaching them that, as Christians, we have to persevere with these things because they are really important even if our mates play sport or go to the seaside on Sundays or laugh at us as God-botherers or Bible-bashers.

If you believe that Christian faith is important, you will want to share your faith with other people. You will not bully them or coerce them, but neither will you be afraid to tell people in Whom you believe and why you believe in Him.

At Christmas we celebrate the fact that God so loved the world that He sent His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. The very fact of Jesus shows us how much God loves His world – all of it and all the people in it, of every race and colour. The life of Jesus is a demonstration of the way people ought to live in perfect love for God and for our fellow human beings. The way Jesus died is a sign of the price that perfect love is required to pay. The fact that Jesus lives fills everyone who believes in Him with His life-giving Holy Spirit.

If you think these things matter, if you believe they are true, if you really want England to be a Christian country, then you will: put God first in your life; be loyal to His Church; care for other people in need; share your faith with your neighbours; pass on your faith to your children and work to see that Christian principles are reflected in our laws and customs and in public life in general.

Hymn number 118: Firmly I Believe and Truly.