

Who can endure Christmas?

A sermon on Malachi 3: 1-4 & Luke 3:1-6 by Nathan Nettleton, 8 December 2024

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Message

If the message of Christmas is real, then our preparations for it need to be radically life-changing.

Sermon

Back in my early teens, I enjoyed reading the *Narnia Chronicles* by C.S.Lewis, and then as an adult, I got to renew my acquaintance with them and enjoy them all over again when my daughter discovered them, and seemed to spend much of her time in the land of Narnia.

As I was reflecting on today's scripture readings, a scene from the final Narnia book, *The Last Battle*, flashed before my mind's eye. The people of Narnia are being cruelly oppressed, and one of the lies that is told to them to keep them from rebelling is that the demonic god Tash and the true God Aslan are actually one and the same and are giving the orders that result in the present oppressive conditions.

In the real world, this has happened over and over down through history. People are told that you can't rebel against the status quo, because the status quo is ordained by God. Whatever you are experiencing, good or bad, it comes from God so you have to put up with it. Until the last century, pretty much every oppressive regime in history had been maintained on that same lie.

Back in Narnia, in the course of maintaining this lie, the captain of the ruling militia makes a great display in public of calling on Tash and Aslan, although he secretly doesn't believe in either of them. But then in the course of a great crisis, strange things begin to happen and in a series of jolting surprises, he becomes terrifyingly aware that there are great and dangerous forces at work that he doesn't understand and is powerless to control. And at one of those moments, Farsight the Eagle observes the flash of shock and terror that has come across the captain's face, and says, "Ahh, there is the face of a man who has called upon gods in whom he has not believed."

What a wonderful line: "The face of a man who has called upon gods in whom he has not believed." What reminded me of it particularly, was the first reading we heard today, from the prophet Malachi:

The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver.

In other words, be careful what you wish for. "The one in whom you delight," the one whose coming you have longed for, like children longing for Christmas. Prepare the way of the Lord. Is this really what you want? Do you know what you are asking for? Or will you be wearing "the face of one who has called upon gods in whom they have not believed"?

There is a well known quote from Annie Dillard that asks similar questions:

“Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offence, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return.”¹

Annie Dillard speaks of this in regard to the ordinary Sunday service, but I suspect she would agree that at no time is this absurdity writ more large than at Christmas. For it is at Christmas that the name of Jesus is tossed around most blithely and mindlessly, and by the most people.

Although the secular Christmas festivities and the prayerful celebration of the birth of Jesus have separate origins and separate meanings, they have become so firmly welded together that very few people, regardless of their religion, can imagine doing Christmas without singing some carols about baby Jesus. They quite likely make no distinction between the ones about baby Jesus and the ones about Santa, but people still want both. Perhaps like the Narnia captain, we have indeed believed that the two god’s are now one.

I can’t remember which Melbourne based Jewish writer it was, perhaps Danny Katz, who once wrote of sneaking off to Carols by Candlelight, aware that it wasn’t a very Jewish thing to do and yet feeling a strong need to participate in the festive rituals of the surrounding society, and then recognising lots of other Jewish friends there, all pretending not to notice each other. And I don’t want to run that down. The festive rituals of any culture are important. They are part of our communal identity, and part of the joy of life.

But I do squirm uncomfortably at the way the merging of the secular and the sacred serves to trivialise the stories of Jesus. I once read a sermon for All Saints Day written by an American preacher, and he told of an Asian immigrant he had known who was terrified by the American Halloween festivities. She felt that they were mocking the spirits of the dead, and she felt sure that the spirits of the dead would not take this insult lightly and we would all be made to pay.

And while I don’t think the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a vindictive or vengeful god, or even a thin-skinned god, my anxieties around Christmas are a little like her anxieties about Halloween. “Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke?” or are we in danger of wearing “the face of one who has called upon gods in whom they have not believed.” For as Malachi says, “who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”

I think this is why the Church, in its wisdom, sends us the fiery figure of John the Baptist in the lead-up to Christmas every year. John is no soft and cuddly Santa figure. He is a tough and uncompromising prophet who comes like refiner’s fire or fuller’s soap or paint stripper to prepare the way for the coming Lord. And the last thing John is going to let us get away with is preparing for the coming of the Lord by just hanging up a few decorations to pretty things up. No superficial tizzing up of appearances will do.

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41

Instead, it is “make his paths straight. Fill the valleys, level the mountains, make straight what is crooked, and make smooth what is rough.” In other words, take a searching look at yourself and make some major and far-reaching changes where they need to be made.

So this season of Advent, which in part is about preparation for Christmas, confronts us with a choice; with two alternatives. We can merely go with the flow and prepare for the mainstream secular Christmas by hanging up decorations, powering up a whole bunch of extra lights, shopping till we drop, and plastering over the cracks in our extended families so that we can pretend to enjoy one another’s company for the festive parties.

Or, alternatively, we can hear the fiery prophetic voice of the Baptist and prepare for the coming of the Lord. Tash and Aslan are not one and the same. Santa and Jesus are not one and the same. And so beware blithely invoking the names of gods you have not taken seriously.

But beyond the tizzy decorations and the blithe trivialising of an ancient story, there is a sacred story, a true story of the One who comes forth to save us and remake us; the One for whose coming we had best prepare in all seriousness. Do not trivialise and sentimentalise that name or that story, but as we say each week, “do not flee the Word that comes forth to save us” either.

Heed the warning voice of the Baptist, and open yourselves to the refiner’s fire so that, as the Apostle Paul said in our other reading, “in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”