

“Do We Know it’s Christmas?”

What is it with the Church? The rest of the world is singing “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year” and we sit here listening to John the Baptist rant at all of the people of Jerusalem and Judea. Instead of singing “Silver Bells” or “Christmastime Is Here” we cannot get any more joyful “There’s a voice in the wilderness crying.” As Lucy Van Pelt tells Schroeder, “I mean No, no. You don’t get it at all. I mean ‘Jingle Bells.’ You know, Santa Claus and ho-ho-ho, and mistletoe and presents to pretty girls.”

Twenty some years ago I had a wise wonderful priest who asked, “I wonder when the church is going to get on board with the culture and start celebrating Christmas earlier?” It is a good question. Should the Church give in to the culture, a culture mostly driven by big box retailers and ad agencies, or should the Church stay the course?

The Church could attempt to co-opt the culture. We believe that the Church has been good at co-opting the culture. Early on in the church’s history December was chosen as the time when we would celebrate Jesus’ birth in order to replace the popular pagan rituals around the Winter Solstice. The Church even adopted some of the language and symbolism of the Winter Solstice celebrations, most obviously the return of light to the world after the darkest day of the year (that is in the Northern Hemisphere).

The church has also been known to give in to the culture. For example, the Roman Catholic Church after hundreds of years of popular veneration of Mary adopted the tradition of the Immaculate Conception.¹ This is the theological concept that Mary had to be born free of sin in order for her to give birth to Jesus who was also free of sin. It was only at the First Vatican Council in 1868 that it was made a dogma of the Roman Church.

However, I think it would be difficult for the Church to co-opt secular traditions around Christmas, as the Church does not have the power and influence it had in the early Middle Ages. I think that if the Church capitulates to the culture the Church will actually be giving in to the culture of materialism and worship of things snowy rather than holy.

Contrary to my priestly mentor’s imagining that we should give in to the culture, I think the Church has a special opportunity at this time of year. Ours can be a powerful witness in opposition to the culture of materialism. This opening was not present during the era of Christendom, because the Church was too closely allied with the state. I think that Christianity, and Anglicanism in particular, has the opportunity to witness to the societies that have gotten caught up in acquisitiveness.

The religion of possessions, money, greed, and selfishness are hollow. Jesus and John told us those two thousand years ago. Sadly, the Church when it

¹ Those outside of Catholicism often believe that the Immaculate Conception is a theology of Jesus’ birth.

became an institution of the state got co-opted by the power structures and ideals of imperialism. Constantine may have been converted to Christianity, but he did not give up being emperor, give away his possessions and power, or become a mendicant monk. Rather the men of the church latched on to the power structures of the Empire and created a church hierarchy that mimicked it.

It is why St. Francis and St. Clare, in particular, were so popular. They renounced wealth, possessions, and power for a simple life that imitated the life of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This does not mean we plod dully through the period of Advent with sad and mirthless faces while our nonreligious and low church friends sing carols, go to parties, shop till they drop, and devour holiday goodies and television specials like air. We can participate in the cultural activities that mark the holiday season. Remember we are Anglicans and we revel in the created order, for all of creation is good. We can set our priorities differently from others.

We do not have to go to every party and over indulge in all food and drink. We can show restraint. We can purchase gifts but not max out our credit cards. We can also make sure that some of our spending is on those in need, hungry, and refugees. If our financial resources are not sufficient for extra giving of that sort we can give of our time at a food bank, shelter, A Place To Be, or other such charitable organization.

We can model a different kind of run up to Christmas that includes festivities, but also has room for reflection on the mystery of the Nativity, the Virgin birth, the choice that God made to come into the world as a tiny babe of poor and powerless parents. We can make time for spiritual reading and study. We can make time for additional worship and devotion.

When our friends talk of the busyness of their season we can let them know that is not the only option. We can share the life-giving and soul enriching practices that we participate in. We can remind them that this season of expectation is not about expecting the next party, or what present we will receive. It is about expecting the birth of the one who saves us from our foolish selves and saves us from our sins.

The rituals of Advent do not have to be joyless nor does it have to be frenzied. We Anglicans, the people of the Via Media (the middle way), know that extremes are not the only options. We can be the voices crying out to slow down, take a breath, wonder at creation, and most importantly, prepare ourselves for something more wonderful than anything that Madison Avenue sells. We are preparing ourselves for the coming of God in human form a more magnificent mystery and gift the world has ever known. You do not need one red cent to be part of that celebration, just an open heart, a mind for wonder, and willingness to like the shepherds to go and see.