

Christmas: A Holiday without Borders

Clay Nelson ©13 December 2015

I confess I am sometimes subject to flights of fancy. I had an episode a few days ago. I wondered what Jesus would think if he actually came back as some Christians believe he will some day. “Came back from where?” is a question that comes to mind. But never mind. It would be especially intriguing to hear his reactions to what he would find if he came back at this time of year. What would he think?

Would it be, “Oh this is so cool. Pretty lights, joyous music, presents, and it’s all about me. Santa, I want an iPhone 6S plus under the tree.” No, probably not. I suspect he would wonder who the hell is this Christ fellow they want to put back in Christmas, and why do some insist he, Jesus, is the reason for the season? And if he is the reason, who is this jolly fellow in a red suit with eight tiny reindeer and what does he have to do with him? When someone explains it to him, he might say, “So that’s how I get my iPhone.” No, probably not. He would more likely be gobsmacked that it is him people are focused on and not his message, but if they insist on doing so it would be nice if they did not portray him as a sweet, blond and blue-eyed European. He came to subvert the system and he looked like someone Donald Trump would not allow into the US, even if he had any inclination to go there.

I doubt he would be amused that they made a religion out his ministry. And worst of all the very people he came to confront for their hypocrisy and craven desire for power, religious leaders and politicians, have co-opted him, or at least their version of him, to keep people oppressed and divided.

I’m sure he would be confounded that we celebrate his birthday at all. People didn’t take much notice of birthdays in his day, especially if you were a peasant. I’m not sure he would be pleased that it was decided he was born on 25 December three years after most scholars theorise was his birth year. For that is the same day the Romans and the Greeks before them celebrated the feast of Saturnalia. He liked a good time as much as any one. Some criticised him for being a party animal, but some of the carryings on at this Roman holiday would most likely be a step too far for him.

The ancient Greek writer, poet and historian Lucian (in his dialogue entitled *Saturnalia*) describes the festival’s observance in his time. In addition to human sacrifice, he mentions these customs: widespread intoxication; going from house to house while singing naked; rape, sexual license and consuming human-shaped biscuits as a more genteel form of human sacrifice. That’s right, eating a gingerbread man represents a bloodless human sacrifice.

There is no doubt that our recently returned Jesus would be horrified. Sure people need to blow off steam, tip back a wineskin or two of good wine, sing and dance, feast on tasty morsels not always available, but rape, ridicule, scapegoating, and human sacrifice are definitely not something he wants us to associate with him and is pleased that such practices are not as popular. Although it is clear they have not totally disappeared.

On his return someone will surely introduce him to television. If that person is an evangelical Christian they might turn on Fox News for him to discover how dire things are. Apparently there is a war on Christmas. It has become a Christmas tradition for Fox to find stories that seem to suggest Christians’ Christmas is under attack. People who wish others Happy Holidays instead of Happy Christmas are always singled out. Fox is apparently not aware that from November 1 to January 15 seven different faiths celebrate 29 different holidays. Of course, for Fox and their audience there is only one legitimate holiday. There are also usually a number of stories about people of other faiths or

no faith who object to nativity crèches on public land. When the courts in the US agree, there is at least one news cycle dedicated to how horrible and unpatriotic non-Christians are, because everyone knows the US is a Christian nation. Not!

This idea that there is a war on Christmas in the US has even spread like a virus to, of all places, New Zealand, thanks to that instrument of the devil, talkback radio. Kerre McIvor writes this about it in her Herald column:

“Word spread quickly. The talkback callers were incensed.

“ ‘They want to ban Christmas!’ exclaimed first one, then another, then more and more men and women.

“They couldn't tell me who ‘they’ were. But it was ‘them’, all right. Those people who don’t look like us, don’t dress like us and don’t speak English.

“The news that ‘they’ wanted to ban Christmas was the catalyst for revealing other horrors ‘they’ had perpetrated.

“They got rid of the Nativity play at a school someone’s friend’s granddaughter had gone to. They spat on a woman that someone’s neighbour's cousin knew, because she was wearing shorts.

“They were taking over this country and we were all too damned PC to rise up to stop them.

“For the record, the reason for this sudden and contagious outbreak of outrage was the Auckland Regional Migrant Services agency had issued invitations to a festive lunch, a move taken so non-Christians and those who don’t celebrate Christmas didn’t feel excluded.

“Basically, it’s an end-of-year bash, similar to those held in every office and workplace around the country.

“Some businesses call them Christmas parties, others end-of-year parties – in this case, the Migrant Services agency chose to call it a festive lunch, have been doing so for years, but this year, it became an issue.”

Jesus, being a pretty clever guy, picks up pretty quickly that where news media accounts are concerned at this time of year, this is the silly season. But using the celebration of his non-birthday to be an occasion for causing division and hate is not silly – it is against everything he was willing to die for. Being the natural reformer he is, he decides to send me a message to proclaim to you – knowing full well you would be a tough crowd. He knows some of you find the accounts of his birth nonsense, as well as the idea that he is any more divine than the rest of humanity. While he agrees with you about the latter, he wasn’t sure about the narratives. So he read them. While there was no relation in the narratives to what actually happened according to his mum and dad, he was impressed with the stories. They did capture what he understood his mission to be. He really liked the angels, especially their message of peace and good will. He did wonder what the wise men’s less than useful baby gifts were all about.

This is what Jesus in my flight of fancy has to say:

“Christmas is not just for Christians. And it certainly isn’t about me. Christmas is a religious and a secular holiday. Its message has no borders. Even those of other religions celebrate aspects of Christmas. There are Jews who put up a Chanukah bush with their Menorah. There is many a humanist who gives gifts and enjoys the conviviality of the season. Many people in China and Japan who are atheists or non-Christians celebrate Christmas traditions. Muslims, who do not celebrate my birth but respect me highly as a prophet, make a point of supporting Christians in their community who do. Those who attack Christmas would appal them.

“Too often today religious differences have become more important than our similarities. There are those who claim that only their particular religious perspective is true, and thus all others are false. They missed my point. We are one. Our religious labels do not determine us. And I couldn’t care less about what label you use to define yourself. I am much more concerned by your actions. Humanity may celebrate different holidays. Yet, we are bound together by our common understanding that the human mind and heart, while fallible, ultimately determine the future, ultimately decide our fate upon this earth. I came before and am back again in hope of bridging any divide that might separate us. I believe that we must see the world from each other’s perspectives. We don’t have the luxury within a world, which grows smaller each day, to imagine ourselves as islands. To see the world from a different perspective is not easy, yet when we move beyond our self-imposed limits, the safe boundaries that we have created for ourselves, we can begin to build upon our differences to make a healthier and more just society.

“I’ve considered the Christmas story and what it says to me. It is not much different from Chanukah celebrated by my people. That story begins with oil, a vessel of oil that was to last one day but lasted eight. Let me say clearly that even in my day we knew this was a myth, a complete fantasy so obviously created by the rabbis of a later generation that we could date when the story came into existence. The rabbis propagated this tale for a reason. The story of Chanukah had already been written down in the Book of Maccabees, but the rabbis weren’t satisfied. That story didn’t meet with their approval or their needs. So the rabbis turned a very human event, a story about a military victory, into something it wasn’t — a tale about a miracle.

“By doing so, they tried to eliminate a value that is essential to the Jewish experience, a value that has continued to raise itself up throughout Jewish history – that the future rests upon us. The future is dependent upon the actions of people, based on our sense of right and wrong and our willingness to act, to stand up against injustice, to comfort the sick, and to clothe the naked. The world is transformed through human action.

“Thus when the great rabbi Hillel was asked to encapsulate the essence of Judaism while standing on one foot, he didn’t speak of belief, nor of what will happen when we die. He simply said, ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. All the rest is commentary.’

“When I consider the story of my birth and the thousands of different interpretations over history, I read the story as a message about being human and the power that lies within us to transform the world.

“I ask you, ‘Why did those authoring the birth narratives decide to describe me and all I was to represent, in human terms? The authors could have described the messiah as an angel or some other celestial being not yet known to humankind. The messiah, like the God of the Bible, may have never been seen, but only revealed through word or sign. The authors of this story made a decision to cast the messiah as human. Theirs was a conscious act – deliberate, determined. I draw from this a powerful message, one often ignored and overshadowed by the discussion of my divinity. The message is that the future of humans lies not in the hands of the gods but rather in the hands of people. That is certainly true to my message expressed long before the stories were told.

“The authors of this tale further created a powerful and disturbing image with contrasts that are sharp and clear. The story begins with a pregnant woman and her caring husband looking for a place for her to give birth, but there is no room, no place for this outcast family. This is a strong image. Made stronger by the world’s response today to Syrian refugees. I hope we can all imagine what it would be like to need a safe place to rest, to lie down, exhausted, and yet to find all the doors that we knock upon are closed to us.

“Surely, the authors of this myth could have spoken of their finding a glorious spot for me to have been born, a place rich in beauty and comfort. If a miracle in the sky could signal my birth, then

certainly a miracle could have occurred so that this outcast family could have given birth to me in a more appropriate place than a manger.

“I have to ask: ‘Why the manger? Why a place for animals, an unworthy place for any person to be born, rich or poor, leader or follower?’ To me it suggests that the authors of this tale understood, as we do today, that there exists in society a divide between those who have and those who have not. In every age there are those more fortunate and those less so, those who live on the edge of despair, those who do not know where their next meal is coming from, those who are not even certain that they will have a roof over their heads when the winds of winter blow, a place to reside even when they are to give birth. And then, to capture all the hopes and dreams and the possibilities for the future, they chose not a god or titan or angel, but they picked the image of the infant, the most vulnerable person in our society, totally dependent, helpless, who looks to adults for food and safety.

“With any baby, there are unknown possibilities, unknown recognized potential, unimagined greatness. When we see an infant for the first time, no one can predict the child’s future. While we may know that children born to poverty and hardship have a difficult life ahead, we hope that perhaps they can break the cycle. The new-born, the infant, represents the hopes, the dreams, the potential that exists within one human life, to transform all that he or she encounters.

“It strikes me that both Chanukah and Christmas declare that hope is found not in the farthest reaches of heaven, but rather in the compassion of the human heart, the durability of the human spirit, and the wisdom and insights of the human mind. The hope for the future lies within people, young or old, who may celebrate one holiday or another, born in luxury or on the edge of poverty.

“My message – passed from generation to generation, but often ignored because it places great responsibility upon each of us – is that the hope for the future lies within the community of people.

“And yes, as much as I would like to have an iPhone, all I really want for Christmas is peace and goodwill for all. That is a message that transcends all borders. Please make it happen. It is up to you.”