

## **CHRISTMAS, FROM SHADOWS TO REALITY**

### **Experiencing the reality of a living Christ**

As Christmas this year fades into shadows, the thought crossed my mind that we wouldn't have had Christmas at all if it wasn't for Christians. Christmas was a Christian idea - borrowed, admittedly, from a pagan sun god ceremony - but officially stamped on the calendar as Christ's birthday back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. And ever since then, barring a few blips, when Christians themselves condemned Christmas because it strayed away from its original meaning, Christmas has been part of us.

I find that fascinating, that a ceremony designed to celebrate the birth and founder of Christianity has been accepted for so long and by a culture that's now mostly non-Christian, and as the biggest event of the year still!

But if it wasn't for Christians we wouldn't have Valentine's Day, Easter, Thanksgiving and Halloween, either. Valentine, or Valentinus, was a martyred Catholic saint; Easter remembers the death and resurrection of Christ; Thanksgiving was started by Christians, and a ceremony for dead Christians morphed into Halloween. We wouldn't have Santa Claus, either, if it wasn't for Nicholas, a 4<sup>th</sup> century Christian bishop. All these holidays have a Christian origin, whether it's a Christian saint, a Christian principle or an event in the life of Christ.

Equally fascinating, for me at least, is how our culture has kept these days on the calendar but turned them into secular holidays instead. Who today, for instance, celebrates Valentine's day to honour a Christian martyr? Who, but for a few diehard Christians trying to put "Christ back into Christmas," celebrates Christmas to remember why Christ was born? And do parents care when visiting Santa Claus that their child is sitting on the knee of a long-dead Christian priest?!

I've wondered, then, what I'm supposed to do as a Christian when days with Christian origins are no longer celebrated with their Christian meaning in mind. Non-Christians aren't bothered at all, of course; every holiday, whatever its name, is time off and time to party, and who cares about origins and meaning so long as the kids are having fun? Should I not be bothered too, then, and just go along with everyone else? Or should I stop joining in because these days are no longer Christian, and in some cases have gone right back to their pre-Christian pagan roots, like Halloween?

It's been a dilemma faced by Christians whenever the secular has squeezed out the religious, or totally taken it over. On the other hand, is there not some pleasure to be had for Christians in seeing non-Christians still observing Christmas and seeing the change in people that Christmas creates? People who couldn't care less about Christ, for instance, behave in embarrassingly Christ-like ways at Christmas-time, giving gifts to each other, giving to charity and serving the poor. And that great Christmas icon, Santa Claus, has turned out remarkably like Jesus Christ, in his love for children, his happy nature and his giving spirit.

The original reasons for Christmas may have been forgotten, then, but the shadows of its meaning and purpose remain. Christmas, for instance, pictures joy to the world, guaranteed one day because of the birth of Christ, and even though Christ takes a backseat for most people at Christmas-time it's still the season of greatest joy. So even through our limited, secular shadows a taste of what God has in store for us is being preserved.

But if the shadows are that pleasurable, what of the joy that awaits those who step outside the shadows and discover the reality, Jesus Christ?

This was the challenge posed by the apostle Paul in Colossians 2:17. People in his day were happy with shadows too, just like millions of people today are happy with Christmas if it involves nothing more than food, partying, gift-giving and drinking. But simmering below the surface of Christmas is a promise made at Christ's birth of peace and joy that would reach far beyond just a couple of days of pleasure. It would enable people to be calm and content all year, even in the most trying of circumstances.

Paul spoke of it as "a peace beyond all understanding (Philippians 4:7)," a peace he experienced personally "in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want (verse 12)." No matter what life threw at him he found to his great joy that "I can do everything through him who gives me strength (verse 13)." Out of the shadows came this marvellous reality of a living Christ who was with him all the time.

We can move from the shadows to that kind of reality, too, because Christ was born for all of us, not just for Paul. We too, then, can experience Jesus Christ as a real and ever-present source of help and calm whenever trouble hits.

But isn't that what Christ was born for, to provide everlasting peace and joy, not just a few days of it at Christmas-time? I certainly hope so because a new year stretches ahead and I suspect, based on last year's troubles, we're in for another year of the same. I'm easily frightened, so I'm glad it's not just shadows I have to depend on to see me through, that beyond the shadows is the reality of a loving, all-powerful Jesus Christ