

*Preached by the Revd Dr Michael Piret, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford, on Advent Sunday (29 November) 2009.*

I once knew an aspiring literary critic who wrote a complicated scholarly article, as a joke. Its aim was to prove that a great sonnet, dating from the early 1600s, by John Donne - 'Batter my heart, three-person'd God' - was the main source and inspiration for the country-and-western hit, 'Drop-kick me, Jesus, through the goal posts of life.' The whole question of influence can be vexing at any time. But for some people it's especially vexing at Christmas. Consider the Christians, of a certain disposition, feeling uneasy about all the tinsely secular aspects of the holiday. And then spare a thought for the Atheists, trying to rescue whatever they can, even if it's only a good time, from the unfortunate influence of the birth of Jesus Christ, on what would otherwise make a very pleasant non-religious festival.

In this challenge to reduce opposing influences to nothing, it's pretty clear that when it comes to Christmas, the Atheists have, far and away, an easier hill to climb than the believers. You don't have to do a brief trawl on the internet to see why, because I've done that for you, and I've come across all sorts of ways in which Atheists encourage each other to have a happy, fulfilling, non-religious Christmas. Did you know that last week the American Humanist Association bought ads on two hundred buses and fifty railcars, in and around Washington DC, with smiling individuals in Santa hats, and the slogan, 'No God? No problem! Be good, for goodness' sake.'<sup>1</sup> The end of that slogan, of course, shows more than influence: it's a direct quote, from the holiday masterpiece, 'Santa Claus is Coming to Town.' Santa is a good thing, says the Atheist activist Austin Cline<sup>2</sup> - who points out, altogether fairly, that it's the perfectly secular figure of Santa Claus, not Jesus Christ, who is the most prominent popular symbol of Christmas today.

I don't, myself, think it's necessary (or desirable) for Christians to respond to this situation by trying to expunge the secular influence of popular culture from Christmas - not even if we could. Anyway, these popular trappings of the season at least get the world's attention and indicate, in their own peculiar way, that something special is meant to be going on. But it will do us and the world a lot of good, if we are clearer in our own minds about just what it is that we *are* celebrating at Advent and Christmas.

If it isn't the Alpine or Nordic beauty of evergreen trees, nor snowy hillsides, sleighrides, special food served at big family gatherings, nor the jolly old man in the red suit, what is it? Our Atheist activist friend Mr Cline points out, that Christians shouldn't even claim to be celebrating the so-called 'Christmas spirit' (generosity, charitable giving, kindness): for that, he says, is largely a Victorian development, something which just turned out to be more popular than time-honoured, old-fashioned, sombre reflections on death, salvation, and the Lord's Second Coming at the end of time.

To give Austin Cline his due, much of what he says is right. There is a dark, sombre dimension to Christmas which we have relinquished. And it ought to be reclaimed, because its darkness and depth are profound, and really must be part of any grown-up, seriously Christian account of what Christmas is about. I think T.S. Eliot takes us right to the core of what we should be celebrating in this season, in words he gives to Thomas Becket, in his play *Murder in the Cathedral*. The Archbishop is preaching at Mass on Christmas morning in the

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<sup>1</sup> See the Association's website, [www.americanhumanist.org/press/2009\\_Holiday\\_Ads](http://www.americanhumanist.org/press/2009_Holiday_Ads)

<sup>2</sup> 'We wish you a Godless Xmas': What's Secular, Godless, about Christmas Holidays?' ([atheism.about.com](http://atheism.about.com))

year 1170. He meditates on the way in which Christmas, especially the Mass itself, is the point at which the birth of Christ in Bethlehem touches and meets with the suffering and sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. This is what the great Nativity Mass of Christ is about. This is the time when ‘we celebrate at once the birth of Our Lord and His Passion and Death upon the Cross.’ Eliot’s Archbishop Thomas continues: ‘Beloved, as the World sees, this is to behave in a strange fashion. For who in the world will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same reason? For either joy will be overborne by mourning, or mourning will be cast out by joy; so it is only in these our Christian mysteries that we can rejoice and mourn at once and for the same reason.’<sup>3</sup>

A trivial autobiographical point from me. When I was a child, I used to become deeply unsettled if anything happened to spoil the atmosphere of happiness, the air of perfect celebration, on Christmas Day. Any shadow of unhappiness, discord, family argument, misfortune, seemed to me the worst thing that could possibly happen. Insofar as my Christmas thoughts at that age had anything to do with the coming of Christ, I suppose they would have been focussed purely on the child in the manger, the infant tender and mild, whose divine perfection (along with our celebrations) had to be kept intact, inviolate, preserved, safe, insulated from any kind of danger or challenge. But that isn’t how the story of Jesus unfolds. And it isn’t the way *our* story unfolds either. Which is something we learn as the years go by. To take one example: on a much more recent Christmas – the afternoon of Christmas Eve – I found myself sitting in hospital with the husband of a member of our College staff, sitting beside the body of his wife, who had just died (aged about fifty). As he began to absorb the shock of his loss, it became clear to me then, as it is now, that if the coming of Christ has anything to say to us which is of ultimate value, it must have something to say to situations like that. It must be a faith not only of glowing candles and coloured lights, of presents and happiness and joy, but a faith that speaks to us in darkness, grief, and loss.

The physically vulnerable baby Jesus comes in the fullness of time to undergo the wounds and death of the Cross. Likewise our own hopes and dreams of perfectly preserved safety, unassailable happiness, are bound to be confronted by a world which can seem as hard as nails – hard, like the nails that pierced the crucified Christ. Yet it’s in that hard and painful reality, not just in the happy times, that Christmas brings us good news, genuinely good news. That in Christ, God, the ground of our being, comes to redeem and restore broken humanity to himself. He doesn’t come to us like a first-century superhero, not as a protector and preserver of inviolate perfection. He comes to us as the wounded one who is the redeemer of the wounded, as the friend of the broken, as the transformer of the troubled, the afflicted, and the fallen. He comes to us in the whole, in the entirety, of the human condition. That is why Christianity is so much more than a feel-good religion. It isn’t just about a sweet baby on a bed of straw; it’s about a man racked with pain and dying on a Cross, who, on the other side of agony and death, wins through to life: life more glorious, and triumphant, than what came before.

When we get to the offertory hymn today, and again tonight in Music and Readings for Advent, we’ll sing ‘Lo, he comes with clouds descending.’ It’s a hymn which says that even in his triumphant Risen Life, the body of Christ Glorified still bears the wounds of his passion and death. Those wounds, what the hymn calls the ‘tokens of his passion,’ have not

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<sup>3</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (Interlude), in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1971).

somehow been charmed away, as if, magically, the crucifixion never happened. Many of you will have been here on Sunday of Fourth Week, when our preacher, Professor John Hull, was talking about transformation in the context of his own complete loss of sight some thirty years ago. I once heard John, in another setting, talking about disability more generally, and saying this: 'It is to me a source of supreme consolation, that in heaven, at the right hand of God the Father, there is a broken man.' The wounds are there, even though they have been overcome. That, for every one of us, can be taken as a source of immense encouragement. Because it can help remind us that our own wounds – our grief or loss, brokenness in body or mind, disappointments whenever they come to us, frustrations, the unhappy harvest of old mistakes, or maybe just feelings of frailty in the face of overwhelming challenge – it can help remind us that these wounds of ours, too, have their place, and perhaps will even have their part to play, in our transformation and God's victory. They have their place in the *whole* story of the one who came to bear our griefs, and carry our sorrows.

I hope you have a happy Christmas. But regardless of whether it's one of your happiest ones, I wish you something better and deeper: a good Christmas. It is bound to be a good Christmas, if you hold in your heart the *whole* story of God's gift in Christ: not only the birth of the baby in Bethlehem, his holy mother, the shepherds and the wise men, the wonder of the Word made Flesh; but if, also, you hold in your heart the memory of his sacrifice on the Cross as our Redeemer: wounded – but glorified, victorious, and transformed.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.