

The Other Side of Christmas

Luke 2:15-20

1st Sunday after Christmas

26 December 2010

After all these weeks of looking forward, anticipating and preparing for the Great Day, here we are at the 26th December. The other side of Christmas.

The other side of Christmas is, of course, the time when we count the cost of what we have spent during the festive season. A misprint in a church bulletin once stated that the choir anthem that day would be "I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day"! Is that not exactly how it is for many people on the other side of Christmas? The bells turn so quickly to bills.

In a parody of Clement Moore's famous poem, one writer puts the matter this way:

*'Twas the day after Christmas and all through the house
Children sat slack-jawed, bored on the couch.
Wrappings and toys littered the floor,
An incredible mess that I did abhor.*

*With Mom in her robe and I in my jeans,
We waded in to get the place clean.
When suddenly the doorbell: it started to clatter,
I sprang to the Security-View to check out the matter.*

*The new-fallen snow, now blackened with soot,
Was trampled and icy and treacherous to foot.
But suddenly in view, did I gasp and pant:
An unhappy bill collector and eight tiny accountants.*

*The door flew open and in they came,
Stern-looking men with bills in my name.
On Discover, on Visa, on American Express,
On MasterCard too, I sadly confess.*

*Right to my limits, then beyond my net worth,
Over the top I had charged, in a frenzy of mirth.
The black-suited men, so sombre, so strict,
I wondered why me that they had first picked.*

*They stared at me with a look I couldn't miss,
That said "Buddy, when are you for paying for this?"
I shrugged my shoulders, but then I grew bolder,
Went to the cabinet and pulled out a folder.*

*"As you can see," I said with a smile,
"It's bankruptcy that I'll have to file!"
And with a swoop of my arm, and my fingers extended
I threw the bills in the fire: the matter had ended.*

*The scent of burnt ash came to my nose,
As up the chimney my credit-worthiness rose.*

*Without another word they turned and walked out, Got
into their limos, but one gave a shout:*

*"You may think that's the answer to all of your fears,
But there's nothing you'll charge for at least seven
years!"*

The other side of Christmas is also, the time when we count the cost of what we have eaten during the festive season. And for most of us it's a time when we woefully reflect on the fact we have eaten too much. In another parody of Clement Moore's famous poem, one writer says:

*'Twas the week after Christmas, and all through the
house
Nothing would fit me, not even a blouse.
The cookies I'd nibbled, the eggnog I'd taste
At the holiday parties had gone to my waist.*

*When I got on the scales there arose such a number!
When I walked to the store (less a walk than a lumber).
I'd remember the marvellous meals I'd prepared;
The gravies and sauces and beef nicely rared,*

*The wine and the rum balls, the bread and the cheese
And the way I'd never said, "No thank you, please."
As I dressed myself in my husband's old shirt
And prepared once again to do battle with dirt –*

*I said to myself, as I only can
"You can't spend a winter disguised as a man!"
So, away with the last of the sour cream dip,
Get rid of the fruit cake, every cracker and chip*

*Every last bit of food that I like must be banished
"Till all the additional ounces have vanished.
I won't have a cookie – not even a lick.
I'll want only to chew on a long celery stick.*

*I won't have hot biscuits, or corn bread, or pie,
I'll munch on a carrot and quietly cry.
I'm hungry, I'm lonesome, and life is a bore –
But isn't that what the days after Christmas are for?*

*Unable to giggle, no longer a riot.
Happy New Year to all and to all a good diet!"*

The other side of Christmas, of course, invariably brings with it the most familiar emotion of all. One

experienced since childhood. Anti-climax and deflation. Disappointment that, after all the build-up, suddenly it's all over.

In one of the *Peanuts* cartoons, Lucy is walking through a sea of wrapping-paper muttering, "Rats! Phooey! Everything is hopeless! Who cares?" Charlie Brown asks, "Lucy, what in the world is the matter with you?" Again she shouts, "Rats! Phooey!" The last cartoon shows her walking away only to turn and drop a casual comment to the puzzled Charlie Brown. "Of course you realise," she says, "that I'm just experiencing my regular, post-Christmas letdown."³

If we are honest, we will admit that "the other side of Christmas" syndrome is one that comes to us because, over the festive period, we regularly indulge in a certain degree of escapism. It's a time to forget – or, at least put on the back burner – many of the problems that beset us the rest of the year round. But, come the days after Christmas, suddenly there is a knock on the door of our lives and we have to face up to cold, hard reality once again. As the Scottish saying puts it, it's back to "Auld claes and cauld porritch". In other words, it's back to basics with "old clothes and cold porridge".

When you think about it, the shepherds who came to welcome Jesus also must have experienced the other side of Christmas. They must have spent long days and nights on the hills in the monotonous existence of looking after their sheep. Maybe there was a little bit of excitement when wild animals attacked. But, when they were summoned to Bethlehem, this was the biggest, most amazing thing that had ever happened in their lives. By seeing that child in the manger, they had been invited to be part of something they could never have envisioned in their wildest dreams. They had witnessed something unique. Something that was part of God's plan. Something they probably sensed would change their lives – and their world – forever.

For all this, though, after all these events were over, they had to return to the world of their everyday lives and all its problems. Back perhaps to accumulating debts through not making enough money. Or, back to a crumbling marriage because of long days away working. Or, back to work-related health problems such as painful arthritis. By the law of averages, after all the fuss and excitement, these men had to return, to a very difficult life.

And yet, Luke tells us that they "returned, praising and glorifying for all that they had heard and seen as it had been told to them."⁴ They returned to their work, to the Boxing Days and the Monday mornings of their lives in a jubilant and joyful frame of mind. The first Christmas had seemingly been the very zenith of their spiritual experience, but there is no trace of anti-climax; no hint of a lowering of the level of their faith. The Christmas event had somehow lifted them above all their problems and

given them joy and hope for the future.

If we truly reflect on the real meaning of Christmas, if we savour the spiritual dimension, if we embrace the Christ-child rather than just the secular festivities, then we too – like the shepherds – will experience the other side of Christmas as a time, not to be down and despondent, but as a time of gladness and hope. For we will know, without doubt, that Christmas has brought to us one who is Immanuel, "God With Us", as the name implies – one who will be with us every day to help us face the future of 2011 with hope and with joy. We will know with confidence and certainty that we will have one at our side who can give us the help and the strength, the wisdom and the guidance to face and overcome whatever challenges the coming year might place in our way.

So, on this the other side of Christmas, let us, like the shepherds of old, return to our daily lives, not in a downcast and depressed mood but praising and glorifying God for all that we have heard and seen during this season of the year. And we can do this because Christmas – in terms of God being with us in new and exciting ways – is not over. Far from it. In fact, it has only just begun.

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¹ David Frank, *'Twas The Day After Christmas*, Christmas Fun, <http://xmasfun.com/Fun/DayAfterChristmas.asp>

² 'Twas The Week After Christmas, Crosswalk.com <http://www.crosswalk.com/fun/holiday/1304891>

³ Charles Schulz, *The Peanuts Collection*, Little, Brown and Company, 2010

⁴ Luke 2:20