

Articles and Sermons :: The Spirit of Christmas

The Spirit of Christmas - posted by InTheLight (), on: 2005/12/3 11:30

This article about Christmas really hits home for me. The thoughts and feelings are very much like my own though I could never express them as well as the writer has. Just thought I would share this here...

The Spirit of Christmas by Gregory Koukl

I have a confession to make.

In the past few years I've had some difficulty getting into the spirit of Christmas. Now that I think about it, when I say the past few years I guess I mean the past 20 years or so. I guess my whole adult life I've struggled with this and I've wondered why. Maybe you have the same difficulty. Even mentioning the phrase "the spirit of Christmas" raises a few issues for me. It's usually uttered in the context of criticizing the excesses of the holiday season. Christmas season used to start just after Thanksgiving in the good old days. Now it seems like Thanksgiving itself has been lost all together, swallowed up by an ever expanding Christmas commercial season that devours now almost a quarter of our calendar year. That's pretty pathetic, in a way. People observe that and say, gee whatever happened to the true spirit of Christmas. Or they mourn the loss of the true meaning of Christmas.

What's kind of ironic is that what's offered as the true meaning or the spirit of Christmas is almost as pathetic as what it replaces. People say, What happened to the true meaning of Christmas? It's not commercialism. Okay. What is it? They say the true meaning of Christmas is giving. That's what it's all about. It's love, it's joy, it's peace, it's goodwill to men--that kind of thing. In fact, if you look at virtually every single Christmas card, that's what you are going to find. Love and giving and gifts and peace. Ones that are a little more profound or deeper will talk about good will to mankind, and that kind of thing. And you know what? I actually think that is a little pathetic. Not that those things are pathetic in themselves, but when you think of what it actually replaces it is.

On this view of the season one could almost imagine God saying, "Well, it's that time of year again. Christmas, the season of giving, the season of joy and peace and good will towards men. Okay, let's see how am I going to celebrate this year. I've got it. I think I'll become a man. I'll sacrifice myself as a gift. There we go. It's a time for giving. That will be my gift during this time of good will on earth and peace towards men. That would be a fitting statement for the season." So He gave His gift, which incidentally happened to be Himself in the form of a man.

None of these things that I mentioned--peace, good will towards men, giving--are pathetic in themselves. But it seems to me that they pale in significance to the advent which authored Christmas 2,000 years ago. The point is that it's God's miraculous incarnation that is the very foundation of those particular things that you read on Christmas cards as characteristic of Christmas. God's act authored it. It gave it substance. It gave it meaning. It gave it context.

To talk about the true meaning of Christmas and not focus on Jesus, to talk about giving without talking about Jesus, to talk about loving without talking about Jesus, to talk about good will towards men and not talk about Jesus is to admire the aroma and ignore the meal. If I can turn a literary reference on its side a bit, it's the clothes without the Emperor. In many ways even the more exalted ways of understanding Christmas as peace and goodwill and kindness and charity and love and giving and all of that are merely the clothes without the Emperor. What that does is reduce Christmas to packages. Beautifully wrapped packages, beautifully ribboned, but with nothing inside them. And that is pathetic because of what is lost. It's a pathetic trade-off.

I want to turn this around and look from just a little different angle for just a moment. I want to return to my earlier comment about the difficulty in getting into the spirit of Christmas lately, even though now I have a deeper understanding of its true substance. You see, prior to my twenty-third birthday I didn't really understand Christmas. Yes, I was raised in a quasi-religious environment, and we went to church on Christmas morning and the like, but I didn't think of Christmas principally as the advent of the Messiah. And when I became a Christian even Christmas carols took on a new significance and meaning to me. But even though I had this deeper understanding of the true meaning of Christmas there was still something missing for me. And as it turns out, to be quite honest with you, when I think about Christmas--especially about the emotional significance it has for me--even now 20 years a Christian, I still think very little about Jesus. I think there is a reason for that. I think at least in my parlance it's the difference between the true meaning of Christmas and the spirit of C

Christmas, in other words, the emotional impact of Christmas. And I'd like to tell you about that distinction.

When I think of Christmas, what I think of is nearly 20 Christmases that I spent--basically the first 20 years of my life--with a dozen or so people that deeply defined what the Christmas spirit is for me, and in this sense I am not speaking of Christmas in a theological way but in an emotional way. This is what made Christmas feel a certain way. It's a way it doesn't feel anymore. I had a feeling for 20 years about Christmas. It's what Christmas was for me and it doesn't feel that way anymore, and that's been the source of some consternation for me.

I suspect there are quite a number of you out there that feel the same thing. As a matter of fact, my sister up in Washington read my reflections that I mailed to her recently on this very issue and I got a message from her the other day, it was really sweet. She was a little bit broken up. I could tell she had been crying and she said, "You know, I am putting this reflection in my scrapbook partly because it reflected things about our family," but partly because her own feelings are much like mine. Why don't I feel the same way about Christmas as I used to, especially now when I have a deeper sense of the significance of it. And if I don't feel that way, then maybe something is wrong with me. Maybe I'm missing it. Maybe I'm unspiritual. Maybe I'm un-Christian. Maybe I'm just not being the kind of parent or adult Christian that I ought to be at this time of year because, now knowing the true theological significance, I ought to be having a more profound emotional experience with Christmas and I'm not.

I am convinced that the thing that makes Christmas an emotional experience for us is what Christmas was for each of us for the first 15 or so years. That's what gave it its emotional content and, by the way, for everyone that emotional content has not been good. Christmas is hard for a lot of people because their sense of the spirit of Christmas, in other words the emotional feeling of Christmas, is not pleasure, it's pain. When they get in the spirit of Christmas it's painful because they associate their Christmases with fights and unpleasantness.

It wasn't like that for me, frankly. My Christmases were wonderful. The beautiful thing about Christmas for me was that it was always the same. It was kind of a still point in a changing world. With Christmas I always knew what to expect, and the sameness and consistency of that holiday created a deep sense of safety and a delicious sense of anticipation for me. In fact, as the years passed, the sequence became almost magical. Do you know what I am talking about? Papa--we called my grandfather Papa--and my grandmother would always arrive early Christmas Eve, and with mom and dad and the five kids and the rag tag assembly of visitors and relatives and friends, and as we all grew older our sweethearts, the house was chaos. But it was kind of a warm pleasant kind of chaos--the kind of chaos the Koukl's are used to, frankly. Mom was very clever with decorations. She is still doing it. There was a homespun warmth about the house mixed with the scent of candle and pine cones. Presents were strewn in a happy disarray on the floor beneath the tree. There were festive drinks, hot cocoa, egg nog, lots of tasty things to nibble. I remember my dad used to always put together these hors d'oeuvres trays by using a grapefruit as a holder stuck with a bunch of toothpicks and pieces of cheese and sausage on the ends of them--kind of like an edible porcupine. There were always a few Christmas carols, dad's baritone on course, mom singing harmony and the kids off key. And though I know better now, nothing seemed really planned. It just kind of all magically happened.

Christmas morning dawned early, well, the kids were up early. Sometimes my folks had to wire us into our rooms until they were ready to get up. But dawn initiated a ritual that we repeated every year until all the kids left the house. All nine of us would station ourselves in a kind of semi-circle around the mountain of gifts that had apparently erupted during the enchanted twilight between barely falling asleep and waking up. My grandfather, Papa, played Santa. He'd creak around the tree like an old squirrel looking for nuts and picked up each little parcel, examined it closely, did his ho ho ho's and then extended his arms squinting through his glasses, announced the fortunate recipient and then deposited the bundle in our arms.

We were poor. I know that now, but somehow as the dawn gave way to morning the pile of goodies at our feet grew. Now there was a very particular way that we opened our presents. Once Papa had whittled the mountain down box by box we would open one present a piece in turn, sharing each other's discovery, going around and around the circle until the last gift was gone. I'll tell you it seemed to take all day. Sometimes it did and it was wonderful.

That's what the spirit of Christmas is, frankly, or was for me. And it won't quite be the same, I suspect, until I take my place at the other end of the stage making memories for my own children when that time comes. And you know what? Even then it will be different. Then I was a child, now I am a man. Remember, Paul said that in 1 Corinthians 15. It's a different application but it fits here because the world looks very different from this end of life. I don't think we could ever capture again what it was--that magic, that mystery, that sense of safety, that sense of excitement that many of us associate with Christmas. In the meantime, I can only catch snatches of the Christmas feeling.

Becoming a Christian has changed my life deeply and my friends, but it really hasn't changed Christmas for me. For me becoming a Christian didn't add as much of a new dimension to Christmas as it did a new dimension to life, which included every day on the calendar. I comprehend the substance of Christmas as I never have before, as I mentioned. It's tragic when that substance is lost, but Jesus has never been the spirit of Christmas for me, that is the emotional pleasure of the season. He is the meaning of the season, but He is not the feeling of the season for me. I suspect that for many of us the feeling of the season has to do with the traditions we were raised with, and if you take the traditions away--those warm and meaningful events, songs, smells, sounds, movies, people, decorations--for many of us you would essentially be taking Christmas away, too. It just wouldn't be the same. There is sweetness to the holiday that just can't be captured in religious terms. Ultimately though, with every good and perfect thing that sweetness comes down from above from the Father of lights during this season of lights. And like Scrooge's second ghost, he merely dispenses a special grace on us unsuspecting recipients, good and evil alike, during this time of year.

I guess I'm saying Christmas can be experienced on a couple of different levels, and each has a distinct value in its own right. It has a substance, a meaning, and that substance is God's gift in Christ. But it also has a feeling, a spirit, an emotional sweetness that even those who know nothing of Christ can enjoy. And that universal sweetness, that holiday joy turned out to be God's gift, as well.

Re: The Spirit of Christmas - posted by crsschk (), on: 2005/12/3 12:49

Ah brother...

This is tremendous and it may take a couple of readings to get the marrow out of it or perhaps into the marrow of it. That tension! The paradox's, there is a sense of 'yes' while I am still trying to gather "where is he going with this?"

It does look like the usual disarray that I mentioned here;

(https://www.sermonindex.net/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?topic_id8335&forum35#63682) The Christmas Tree a Symbol of Pagan Baal Worship Will have to hunt down the "ghost's of Christmas past", pull down the items from the SI attic for just this time of the year, there is a lot of remembered expression and it is good to get this all out in the open for us all to contemplate.

I am not sure which expression here from this brother, and I love Greg Kousser by the way for his expression on many a matter, that reflects the similar changes and muddled emotions of upbringing through Christmas past and what it *now* means, this side of the apprehension from above. It has brought to a fulcrum the truest meaning of Christmas, however wrong headed the world has gone, the Christians of this modern day misunderstanding and promotion of spurious shennanigans ... Oh my soul just bursts trying to extrapolate, articulate (Boy, am I stuck on those words of late).. It is in part this:

Quote:
-----It has a substance, a meaning, and that substance is God's gift in Christ. But it also has a feeling, a spirit, an emotional sweetness that even those who know nothing of Christ can enjoy. And that universal sweetness, that holiday joy turned out to be God's gift, as well.

It's an 'atmosphere', this 'spirit of Christmas', he touches on it I think profoundly here:

Quote:
-----There is sweetness to the holiday that just can't be captured in religious terms. Ultimately though, with every good and perfect thing that sweetness comes down from above from the Father of lights during this season of lights. And like Scrooge's second ghost, he merely dispenses a **special grace on us unsuspecting recipients, good and evil alike, during this time of year.**

That codifies it somewhat. Think of the saints of days gone past, the words attempted in song, the meaning derived and expressed in, anyone who has been around here knows this is coming...

O Holy Night

Placide Clappeau

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth;
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.

A thrill of hope the weary soul rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn;

Fall on your knees, Oh hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night, when Christ was born!
O night, O holy night, O night divine.

Led by the light of Faith serenely beaming
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming
Here come the wise men from Orient land
The King of Kings lay thus in lowly manger
In all our trials born to be our friend.

He knows our need, our weakness is no stranger;
Behold your King! Before Him lowly bend!
Behold your King! Before Him lowly bend!

Truly He taught us to love one another
His law is love and His gospel is peace
Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother
And in His name all oppression shall cease
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,
Let all within us praise His holy name.

Christ is the Lord, O praise His name forever!
His pow'r and glory evermore proclaim!
His pow'r and glory evermore proclaim!

<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/7202/announce.html>

The *meaning* of Christmas.
There is some lines that just grip;

Till He appeared and the soul felt it's worth.

Ponder that!

Quote:
-----A thrill of hope the weary soul rejoices

A thrill of hope! Is there any other? This takes one back to contemplation, that thing that so many are oddly not want to do anymore. There are some great moments in the history of civilization and yet is there one that can draw out more inexpressible wonder, awe, stupendity ... than this? Emanuel! Gods mighty interruption into 'the affairs of man', what a bunch incredulous beings we are! To think that it is by our efforts that this world moves along, by our cleverness and skill and ability. Jesus. Before this, all before this, types and shadows, blurred images and yet promises. The Messiah would come and now incredibly He has come, it is so! It is staggering to contemplate, what else is there than to...

Fall on your knees, Oh hear the angel voices!

I am not sure what it is that I agree with here, but Christmas has more profundity, more incredible joy, more richness and tears, wonderful tears for what it celebrates about Jesus irregardless of how confused the world or the Christians that miss the exacting point of it all in fact is.

It would be great if we could somehow pull all these threads together into one general heading, to share and express what all entails this monumental moment. Before I trail off for the time being it does need to be echoed that this can be a time for many of deep distress, have had my own particular forays into this deep sadness. Alone, away from a former girlfriend of 7 years and a step son of sorts. The breakup shortly before Christmas was devastating, wasn't with the Lord the

n, living in a construction trailer, alone, the first Christmas without my family that I had given everything to... Have never wept so hard in all my life.

Have much, much more to say on all this.

Christ is the Lord, O praise His name forever!

Re: The Spirit of Christmas - posted by crsschk (), on: 2005/12/25 10:10

Quote:

-----It wasn't like that for me, frankly. My Christmases were wonderful. The beautiful thing about Christmas for me was that it was always the same. It was kind of a still point in a changing world. With Christmas I always knew what to expect, and the sameness and consistency of that holiday created a deep sense of safety and a delicious sense of anticipation for me. In fact, as the years passed, the sequence became almost magical. Do you know what I am talking about? Papa--we called my grandfather Papa--and my grandmother would always arrive early Christmas Eve, and with mom and dad and the five kids and the rag tag assembly of visitors and relatives and friends, and as we all grew older our sweethearts, the house was chaos. But it was kind of a warm pleasant kind of chaos--the kind of chaos the Koukl's are used to, frankly. Mom was very clever with decorations. She is still doing it. There was a homespun warmth about the house mixed with the scent of candle and pine cones. Presents were strewn in a happy disarray on the floor beneath the tree. There were festive drinks, hot cocoa, egg nog, lots of tasty things to nibble. I remember my dad used to always put together these hors d'oeuvres trays by using a grapefruit as a holder stuck with a bunch of toothpicks and pieces of cheese and sausage on the ends of them--kind of like an edible porcupine. There were always a few Christmas carols, dad's baritone on course, mom singing harmony and the kids off key. And though I know better now, nothing seemed really planned. It just kind of all magically happened.

Quote:

----- In the meantime, I can only catch snatches of the Christmas feeling.

This article has been ringing throughout my thoughts in recent days. For all the defending and usual splendor of this time ... Oh I do hope for those that are rejoicing today not to do any spoiling of spirit... Please ignore this if that's you. I guess I just didn't expect to be on the flip side of this, this year. This article really expresses that which I could not adequately. But the whole wonderful spirit of Christmas, however you want to make that mean and like this author mine had both the traditional as well as the more profound since being brought out of the darkness, this year perhaps it is but to taste what it can be like for others.

Have had rather devastating past's Christmas's and this year is nothing of that sort. There is a grievousness over many an item, many a loved one, many of the things taken place on this planet.

Maybe all that I might be trying to express here is that it just feels rather flat even with this carrying about in the body ... tears that won't come forth. Sometimes there is neither rejoicing nor mourning, sometimes it's just to endure despite everything, to patiently wait on the Lord. Hope is always there undergirding everything while the emotions may fluctuate.

Jesus will come again. This world will be put right, the creation's relief of its long-suffering groaning's, finally and forever healed. The Lord will rule and reign forever on earth as it is in heaven and the redeemed will forever be glad in His Presence.

Feeling better already :-D

Merry Christmas

(P.S. Now the tears come, thank you Lord)

Re: - posted by InTheLight (), on: 2005/12/26 0:02

Quote:

-----Feeling better already Merry Christmas (P.S. Now the tears come, thank you Lord)

Tears of peace and joy, how precious they are.

(Rom 15:13) Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.

Merry Christmas indeed!

In Christ,

Ron