

December 8, 2019
2nd Sunday Advent, Year A

Sign of things to come

In today's gospel, the figure of John the Baptist bursts onto the scene in Matthew's narrative as the herald of the coming "kingdom of the heaven" (Matt 3:2). He is described as a desert-dwelling preacher, a ferocious religious reformer, with an odd choice of clothing and a curious taste for insects and honey.

This image appears incongruous with the season of Advent and the coming feast of Christmas; and is perhaps more suited to Lent or even Easter, where the desert setting and the themes of repentance and the coming kingdom figure more prominently in the liturgy.

In popular culture, Christmas is wholeheartedly embraced by the wider community outside the Christian communion. It is a time of family barbecues, present-giving, cricket on the beach, and cold beers. Easter, which is a far more significant and liturgically rich feast, does not receive the same press or support. Often it is seen as little more than an opportunity for an extended weekend away.

We might wonder why there is not even the slightest nod to Easter's religious significance. Is it because we are more comfortable with the image of a new-born Jesus in a warm stable with cows and sheep than with the image of crucified and naked Jesus dying alone on a stark hillside? Or is it that Christmas more easily lends itself to a celebration of that great new secular cult: consumerism?

Christmas is as much a time for extravagance and credit card debt as it is for family get-togethers. So often amidst our rejoicing and songs commemorating the "choirs of angels" we forget the enormity of the occasion, when God became incarnate to offer us redemption from sin and death.

Christmas is part and parcel of the Easter message. The birth of Jesus only derives real significance from his ultimate death and resurrection. For it was only in the light of that experience that Jesus' first followers eventually came to see that Jesus was God incarnate. His birth in obscurity was conceived anew as the centre-point of history. Hence, the story in Matthew does not shirk from hinting at the end that awaits this babe and that of those who fail to heed his message.

The wise men offer gifts that include myrrh, an aloe used for anointed dead bodies (Matt 2:11); a jealous secular King orders the massacre of innocents to try prematurely to destroy the "newborn king" (Matt 2:16-18); and, a fiery prophet warns of the coming wrath of God against the wealthy, the powerful and self-satisfied who refuse to repent (Matt 3:7-13).

This Christmas, as we come to kneel before the crib in our churches, let us remember that the shadow of the cross looms large over the little stable by the altar. And amid the strains of jaunty carols and festive well-wishes, may we also hear the words of John the Baptist calling us to "produce good fruit as evidence of repentance" (Matt 3:8).

Ian J Elmer
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