

## Christmas – What a Can we REALLY Say?

You might think it would be no challenge for me – a United Church minister with a few years of ministry behind me – to write a few paragraphs about the meaning of Christmas. If so, you'd be wrong.

Maybe it *shouldn't* be that way, but for me, it is. You see, the Gospel stories of Christmas (which I greatly enjoy), the centuries of tradition since those stories were first told (many of which I also enjoy), and the ways our modern society exhibits those traditions don't always combine to create a spiritually uplifting or even consistent meaning today. Finding our way through that maze of contradictory meanings can be very difficult. That's where my own dilemma arises, as I seek to uncover a good and positive place for Christmas in our lives.

I don't know (nor does anyone else today) the historical 'facts' of Jesus' birth that we celebrate at Christmas. The evidence we have is mostly what's in the Bible, and that's surely a somewhat biased set of documents – that's the very nature of 'scripture'. There are a few other historical documents that *may* offer evidence about the historical life of Jesus, notably the writings of Josephus, a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish historian, and a handful of other contemporary Jewish and Roman writers. However, not everyone agrees that those sources are accurate or authoritative, just as there is argument about the historical 'facts' presented in the Gospels themselves. After all, Jesus' birth-stories told in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are not similar enough to simply be different versions of the same story – they actually tell *different* stories.

About now, some readers of these words may be aghast that a minister, especially *their* minister, should have any questions or uncertainties about Jesus at all. Well, folks, I'm not exposing here any notions that haven't been resounding through the Christian community for many, many years. Questions and uncertainties about Jesus are as old as ... well, as old as the first Jesus-stories themselves!

So, is there any foundation for our faith in Christmas? What might it be?

In Christmas, as with so many other aspects of my faith, I need to separate "truth" from "fact". In the end, the historical facts of the nativity stories of Jesus are much less important to me than the foundational truths I find in those stories. To believe in Jesus (as I do), I don't need to believe that every detail about him in the Bible (or elsewhere) is historically factual. The 'facts' about him are so much less important than the 'truths'!

If you and I can set aside whatever uncertainty we might feel about the *facts* of our early faith stories, we can still engage in the joy of discovering and celebrating the *truths* of our faith. Here are some that emerge from the Christmas stories.

**God came into the world in a whole new way – and still does!** This is important – and revolutionary! We call it "incarnational theology", and it affirms that a human being (or, being human, if you prefer that order) can and does contain and embrace something holy at the very core. That holiness at the centre of our being connects us to all that is – and all that was and will be. Humans – you and me and Jesus – are meant to be blessings to the world; it is our central identity. It can be found in an infant just as fully as in the wisest of adults. Incarnation is the central message of Christmas.

**We know God best and most intimately in and through another human's life and deeds.** That's another way of expressing the truth of the incarnation. The story of Jesus – from before his birth through to his death and beyond – is the story of people knowing the presence of God through him and what he said and did. We still experience God that way – in the deeds and words of other people who share our life-journey for a while. That's one way of seeing the truth of Jesus' continuing place as God at work in our human living.

**Emmanuel** (literally, "God-with-us") **is ready – at any time – to break into our world, and into our lives.** Part of the Advent experience of waiting for Christmas is the anticipation that something amazing is about to happen, and it will come upon us unexpectedly. In our human limitedness, we are

seldom 'ready' to experience God in our midst. Yet even so, we can and do often recognize God's presence, even when we haven't begun to look for it.

**Creation's impulse is toward hope, peace, joy and love.** We don't call Jesus the 'Prince of Peace' for no reason. We don't celebrate new hope at Christmas because somebody just decided that a long time ago. "Love came down at Christmas" isn't just a cute line for a Christmas poem or carol. These words, and the ideals toward which they point, are central features of the realm of heaven (or realm of God) about which the adult Jesus speaks so freely, later in the story. These ideals, present in our longing and even in our living at its best, are actually created by holiness at work in us and in the world. While we might account for some of this in human actions (ours and others), there still remains much of the world's movement toward good that is beyond human-centred explanation. For me, and for other people of similar faith, that's the Good News of God's action in the world. We may call it Jesus' ongoing presence among us, and we can be delighted again and again in the story that it joyfully began many years ago in a tiny town in a far-off land.

Now, THAT'S something to celebrate at Christmas!

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'B. M.' with a stylized flourish.