

“Jesus Centre-Stage”

<u>Occasion</u>	Evening Carol Service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 19 December 2004 at 18:30
<u>Readings</u>	Matthew 1:18-22 Luke 2:1-14 Luke 2:25-32
<u>Carols</u>	from Bethlehem Carol Sheet – 12, 15, 18, 3, 7, 22, 16 from Mission Praise - 156
<u>Author/Speaker</u>	Paul Rydon

Why do **you** celebrate Christmas?

As Christmas gifts,
decorations
and paraphernalia
begin to appear in the shops as soon as you are back from your summer
holidays,
what do you think?

And then as December bounds up
and you begin to panic that you are nowhere near ready for the annual
extravaganza that Christmas has become,
do you grouse and grumble about how much there is to do,
or do you look forward to celebrating with great joy,
the birth of Christ?

All of these questions are of course leading up to the much bigger question,
“Is there any Christ left in Christmas at all?”

Several years ago,
there was great publicity when the City of Bradford removed all Christian
symbols from their Christmas decorations.
This led me to look around my own home and I was dismayed to find
that we had no Christian symbols in our house either.

So on Christmas eve, after work,
I went into Stevenage town centre to see if I could buy a nativity set,
but found none except for a felt cut out set in the Early Learning
Centre for children.

Now, I think we have at least three,
and to be honest, these days,
nativity sets are in abundance and can be bought easily.

There is of course

one to be seen at Madame Tussauds.
That's if you wish to see Posh & Becks portrayed as Mary and Joseph,
Tony Blair, George Bush and the Duke of Edinburgh as the three wise men,
Graham Norton, Samuel L Jackson and Hugh Grant as shepherds
and Kylie Minogue as an angel.

A simple plastic doll is, I understand, used for the baby Jesus.
Interestingly and significantly, this apparently innocuous affront to Christianity
caused a furore in the newspapers
and was criticised by the church,
whereas on other much more serious issues,
such as the current debate on 'living wills' and 'backdoor euthanasia',
the church remains silent.

As Michael Gove commented in the Times on December 14, 2004:

"The really surprising thing is that this calculated offence to Christianity, out of all the deliberate assaults on the Church, should have created such a storm. For the truth is, we have become practically inured towards culturally hostility directed at Christianity."

On a different front, I saw this letter in the London Metro on Wednesday
15 December 2004.

It was sent in by a certain Amir Mohamed, a Muslim who lives in Kent.

He says:

"It really winds me up when I hear things like the PM (*Prime Minister*) isn't sending Christmas cards with Merry Christmas on them, in case it offends other religions. I'm Muslim and what offends me is that they think I would be offended by it. It makes out that we're all fanatics and intolerant. Michael Howard is giving out Christmas cards, and he is Jewish. It's time to calm down and stop being so ridiculous. If there really are people who are offended, I say get a life and remember the official religion of the UK is Christianity. Accept it."

Amir Mohamed, Kent

Now I didn't see the report about Tony Blair's Christmas cards,
but when I was at work,
every year I would send out my company's card to selected contacts
and it always irritated me too that we had to send out these
politically correct cards,
where 'Seasons Greetings' replaces 'Christmas greetings',
and I always added a Christmas greeting of my own.
Indeed, I received one this week
from two erstwhile colleagues who work for a company in the Midlands.

Now all this may seem a bit superficial,
but there is a serious point here,
which I think is vitally important that we address.

The fact is that Christianity is being marginalized in British culture
to an extent that has never been seen since Christianity first arrived in these
islands in the first millennium.

Just over a week ago Jayne Ozanne,

a senior adviser to the Archbishop of Canterbury warned the Church of England that Christianity would in time,
be driven underground.

This is what she said:

“I see a time of great persecution coming which will drive Christianity all but underground in the West. I believe that this will primarily take the form of a social and economic persecution, where Christians will be ridiculed for their faith and pressurised into making it a purely private matter.” *(The Times 11 December 2004)*

And we have to ask, “Why?”
What has changed?

Well, what has changed is that as a nation, corporately,
we have decided that Christianity is untrue.
We have swallowed, ‘hook, line and sinker’ the ‘gospel according to Dawkins’,
we have allowed ourselves to be convinced that science has disproved God,
we have accepted, as James Watson, co-discoverer of DNA has put it,
that **“Charles Darwin will eventually be seen as a far more influential figure in the history of human thought than either Jesus Christ or Mohammed”**.
- and the Christian church has all but thrown in the towel.

Now you may be wondering why I should choose Christmas,
and a Carol service at that
to make these points.

And the answer is two-fold.

Firstly, because there has been a plethora of articles in the press in recent days,
highlighting,
discussing,
and often lamenting
the demise of Christianity in modern Britain.
So I am not making these things up.
There is a current debate going on out there.

Secondly,
because it is at Christmas that we see the full effect of this unhappy trend.

There are,
according to the 2001 census
some 37 million British adults who consider themselves as Christian.
By contrast 7 million people say they have no religion
and about 1½ million say they are Muslims.

37 million,
wow!, that’s some number!!

Now we know that many of those never set foot in a church
except for weddings, funeral and sometimes at Christmas,
but another survey suggests that three quarters of people believe in God.

There are 37 million of us,

yet we stand by and allow our government to systematically destroy our
Christian heritage;

We remain silent when Christianity is desecrated and ridiculed in the
media day after day after day;

We say nothing when Philip Pullman's trilogy, 'His dark materials'
is acclaimed as 'a timely atheistic replacement to the
Narnia tales of C S Lewis';

- and we have allowed them to take Christ out of Christmas.

Yet if you take Christ out of Christmas,
what do you have left.

Just three letters, M-A-S,
which originally meant Mass as in the Roman Catholic church,
which is meaningless without Christ.

It could be argued that it is hypocritical for an atheist or a non-Christian to celebrate
Christmas.

For there is nothing to celebrate.

Deny Christ, and we do a disservice to our nation and to our people.

At a pragmatic level,

Christianity has given us so much –
democracy,
equality,
freedom of speech,
tolerance,
education,
a health service,
the rule of law –
and we could go on –

but good though these things are, this is not the central issue.

The central issue is the existence of God,
and who was Jesus.

History confirms that the Christmas story is true.

No-one seriously contends that Jesus was not a real historic figure.

Science has not disproved the existence of God as is commonly believed.

God is not dead,
he is very much alive and well

And God has placed Jesus at the very centre of history and of our world.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no-one comes to the Father
but by me".

Richard Dawkins argues that you and I are just machines,

whose primary purpose in the grand scheme of things
is to pass the genes from past generations on to the future.

But what future?

The everlasting kingdom of man?

Is that all you want to be?
Is this what you really believe?
There has to be more to it than that.

But God says,
‘you are my people and I love you
and I sent my Son to turn you back to me
and make you a part of my everlasting kingdom,
where love and joy and righteousness will remain forever’.
Isn’t this a better offer?

So my plea to you tonight is to put Christ back into Christmas.
When your school cancels its Nativity play,
ask for it to be reinstated and give reasons why you think it should;
When you send greetings and cards to one another,
do it in the knowledge that you are reminding them that on this
day we rejoice that Jesus entered our world.
When you go shopping for all those difficult to find Christmas presents for your
friends and family
do so because the birth of Jesus fills you with such joy
that you want to celebrate the occasion by sending gifts to one another;
When on Christmas day,
you serve the turkey together with cranberry sauce and all those mouth-
watering trimmings,
and the head of the household stands up to give thanks to God for the
feast prepared,
dedicate the meal,
not to the starving millions –
(there is a time and a place to give to them, which I am sure that you
all do as part of your charitable Christian giving)
no, dedicate the celebration to Jesus.
Give Jesus centre-stage.

Acknowledge before God that on this day,
you rejoice and give thanks.

We have grown accustomed to putting mankind at the centre of our thinking.
We live in a culture that is so me-centred that in one newspaper article I read,
the author was questioning whether we had become so self-centred
that we were incapable of parenting our children.

We have so absorbed the humanism of our day
that we have put ourselves at the centre of our lives
We imagine that the Universe revolves around my needs,
my desires,
my well-being.
and all I need to do is have fun.

How many of us have swallowed the idea that we must develop our self-esteem
before we can function as a whole person,
whereas Christianity teaches that we should deny ourselves and follow him
and we will find fulfilment in serving his cause and his people.

No, there is only one person at the centre of the Universe,
and that is Christ.

Not me, not you, not him or her,
not Charles Darwin, nor any other historical figure,
but Jesus.

When God sent Him into our world as a tiny baby,
born in the obscurity of a cattle-stall behind an inn in Bethlehem,
the whole world of mankind pivoted on that moment,
as God launched the greatest rescue mission of all time to save his people,
the men and women whom he had made and loved,
to save them from their inherent sinfulness
and restore them to himself.

So let's give Christ centre stage
not only this Christmas,
but in our hearts,
our lives
and in everything we do and say.

May God bless you all, this Christmas,

Amen

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Therfield Chapel
19 December 2004