

Christmas 2022

FOR OVER 1,000 years today's feast in England has been called 'Christmas', or, to be exact, 'Christ's Mass', a label we find in 1038 and 1131. The mediævals knew what they were doing when they described religious festivals as 'something-Mass'. Not many people nowadays refer to the feast of St Michael and All Angels as 'Michaelmas' or the feast of St Martin as 'Martinmas' but the whole English-speaking world calls today's celebration 'Christmas'. I wonder how many people notice the two bits of the word, 'Christ' and 'Mass'. For the mediævals the most important thing about any feast day was that the daily grind stopped and folk went to Mass and had a celebration meal afterwards. Well, we still see the daily grind come to a halt at Christmas and we still have a celebration meal but, for most people, there is no longer a mass and for too many no longer any experience of belief in Christ. For us, here in Church, 'Christmas' obviously involves belief in Christ and coming together for Mass, and, rather than focusing on those who don't believe and

aren't here, I'd like to think about what we believe and why we are here. Why, for us, without Christ and the Mass, Christmas would make little sense.

My belief in Christ and my belief in the Mass are one and the same thing. Christ reveals himself as 'Emmanuel' – 'God-with-us': he is both divine and human. The 'human bit' is what Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and wise men saw with their own eyes. It is one of the best attested historical facts in the ancient world that the man, Jesus of Nazareth, lived in our midst. The 'God-bit' is what Mary learned to believe and trust when she heard Gabriel's message. It is what Joseph began to learn and believe when he received angelic guidance in a dream. It's what countless generations of Christians have begun to learn and believe. Jesus of Nazareth was a charlatan or sadly deluded if he wasn't who he said he was.

In Christ, God reveals himself to be both God and human – the 'human-bit' is what the eye sees, the 'God-bit' is what the eye of faith sees.

What we understand about Christ, we understand also about the Mass. The 'God-bit' is the Blessed Sacrament and the sacrificial celebration. The 'human-bit' are the accidents of bread and wine, the people taking part, the candles, the carols, the blessing of the crib. We need the eyes of faith to see beyond the 'human bit' to what is really going on. God is hidden beneath the signs of bread and wine: he is really there but discloses himself only to those who look with the eyes of faith, approach with faithful hearts.

It is not hard to see the logic of this parallel – Jesus as God's Son, Jesus as fully human – the Blessed Sacrament as the Body and Blood of Christ and yet, apparently, just bread and wine. It's a bit harder to see and understand the sacrificial celebration. The 'Christ Mass' is not just a commemoration of what happened a long time ago. It is a present day thing – an always present thing – in which we are caught up in the movement of Christ's self-offering to the Father. In other words, we are here not just at the cradle in Bethlehem but at the foot of the Cross. The Altar, you will notice, is in front of the Crucifix. The star which

leads us to the manger takes our eye further to the scene at Calvary. There are different ways of describing the action which is taking place: perhaps the best of all is to say that, just as God in Christ at Christmas takes on our human nature – becomes fully human – so, through the sacrifice of the Mass, we gradually become fully divine. *O admirabile commercium!* (What a bargain!) as the antiphon reads.

It truly is a bargain because, as we know just from watching the news unfold, the world is a very dark place. All our inadequacies and faults pile up and contribute to the sins of the world. The exchange whereby God takes our flesh and we become immortal is possible only by what Christ did for us all on the Cross of salvation. It is this sacrifice which we plead as we offer the Mass. It is the one perfect sacrifice which can take away the sins of the world. It is the sacrifice made possible by the Incarnation, Christ in our midst, God with us. It is by this sacrifice that we are saved.

Looked at like this, it is no surprise that the mediævals called the feast of the Nativity of the Lord 'Christmas'. It is all about Christ and it underlies the very meaning of the word 'Mass'. Without Christ and without the Mass we still have a winter holiday, with too much to eat and too much to drink, and family reunions, successful or less successful, but with Christ and with the Mass we have 'Christ's mass'. A holy and happy Christmas to you all.