

Christmas wrappings: A time for holy foolishness

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Andy, our ten-year-old, loves to hear stories about his baby years. He has a stock of secondhand memories that have become his own through frequent retelling, and his favorite one is about Christmas presents. “Remember what I used to do with my Christmas presents?” he asks. “Yes, we remember. You used to ignore your presents and take all your delight in the wrappings.” Andy is so fond of this story that he still takes delight in the wrappings and is never disappointed in a present, even if it is nothing more than a pair of socks.

Andy still believes in Santa Claus, too, and declines to take the hint when we suggest that Santa, who cannot be everywhere, delegates his role to parents. If we wanted to be moralistic about it, we would encourage, as properly Christian, Andy’s detachment from Christmas presents and discourage, as childishly pagan, his attachment to Santa. Yet Christmas is the time for grace, not moralism; for paradox, not parsimony; for incense, not censoriousness. On this day, as Leo the Great says, sadness has no place; neither saint nor sinner nor secularist is shut out from joy. On this day, as the fourth-century poet Ephrem of Syria observes, a baby holds the reins of the universe. On this day, as G. K. Chesterton puts it, “the hands that had made the sun and stars were too small to reach the huge heads of the cattle.” The dignity of human existence is founded on the comedy of divine self-abasement. Therefore we keep Christmas with solemnity and silliness, asceticism and abundance, playful penance and penitential play.

Christmas is no respecter of boundaries. Christmas spills over into the secular realm, generates kitsch, wastes cash, invites indulgence and incites misrule. Hence it was nearly abolished by the “Godly party” in the English Parliament during Cromwell’s protectorate and briefly criminalized in Massachusetts—understandably, given the debauch it had become. Today Christmas debauchery is less of a problem than consumer frenzy and exhaustion; and again there are those who would like to dim the gaudy lights. Yet when I read Ephrem, Leo, Athanasius and Chesterton (my four favorite writers on the incarnation), I get the sense that there is something fitting, if unbalanced, in the way we keep Christmas. Christmas descends, like the Word of

God, into the midst of our debauchery, frenzy and exhaustion. Christmas spoils the peaceful, recollected Advent we had planned to make. The light of Christ cannot be contained; it stirs up our disordered hearts and unleashes our passions even as it heals them.

In our town, where works of mercy flourish and the ecumenical cot shelter program is generous enough to make the Christ child smile, Christmas lights have become scarcer, sleeker and whiter, more elegant and understated. The few houses that sport abundant colored lights strike some as vulgar and wasteful. Wasteful, too, was the ointment a young woman poured out on Jesus' head. Wasteful, too, were the gold, frankincense and myrrh given to a newborn child who probably cared more for the wrappings. And nothing could be more vulgar to the progressive mind than the idea that God became man.

A fanciful legend has it that St. Nicholas, bishop of Myra, was present at the great Trinitarian Council of Nicea and heard the heretic Arius singing his progressive, understated doctrine: "There was a time when the Son was not." St. Nicholas, it is said, could think of no better reply than to punch him. And the same drama recurs in every generation, with Santa and Santa-lovers taking the Athanasian part. In *Miracle on 34th Street*, Kriss Kringle takes a swipe at the agents of the rival, presumably Arian department store, and winds up in jail under suspicion of madness. In *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, Clark Griswold is so devoted to the dream of giving his family an old-fashioned Christmas that he makes himself a holy fool.

If "there was a time when the Son was not," it would indeed be foolish to celebrate his birth in season and out; we would do better to honor him in an appropriately qualified way, with an Arian deference to the latest historical Jesus scholarship. But if there was no time when the Son was not, if the Son invaded time to snatch us from the jaws of death, then all times are his and all manner of rejoicing is in season. The wrappings in which Andy took delight may have come mass-produced from Wal-Mart, but the Son who always is transforms them into his own swaddling clothes. The toys that will be broken tomorrow may be gross, material, commercial things; but by the power of the incarnation and the cross, they become sacrificial offerings.

Those who oppose Christmas displays in the public square have a point; such displays are less innocuous than they may seem. Every wreath, every Christmas mouse, every wassail mug is an incursion of Christ into time and matter. If, as in Narnia, it is always winter and never Christmas, even the smallest rivulet is a sign of

redemption, and the coming of Father Christmas is a bright herald of the unconquered sun.

Next year, I trust that the cot shelter program will bring its usual comfort and joy to Christ among the destitute. At the same time, I hope we will be a little more vulgar, more ready to accommodate the broad spectrum of Christmas sentiments and observances, more Athanasian and less Arian, more Clark Griswold-ish and less Cromwellian.