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Christmas: Illusions or Reality?

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Text: Matthew 2:13–18 (Christmas 1)

In many of the churches of this country, the Sunday after Christmas is the most forgotten Sunday of the year. And maybe that is in keeping with what is beginning to happen in people's lives: so soon, despite our hopes and best intentions and efforts, the spirit of Christmas begins to wane weak and the wonder changes to a kind of post-Christmas depression that is more related to post-partum blues than it is to glory and wonder and awe. And maybe there is more than meets the eye here: after all Christmas is all about the birth of a child, and it's not uncommon to find exhausted mothers in a bit of a depression after giving birth! So if the church gets a little on the bluesy side after the birth of Christ, and indulges in a little melancholy, maybe that's as it should be. Because the First Sunday after Christmas will not go away, time does not stop with Christmas, and the realities of life and death can only be put on hold for a moment—maybe—while we celebrate.

But there is another way, completely the opposite from the way of trying to forget the downs of life and the tragedies. The other way is realistic, honest, and at the same time, full of hope. This other way is powerful enough not only to overcome the post-Christmas depression of the church, but of the whole society: and even of its causes. It is not the way of trying to forget, but the way of remembering, remembering the true nature of Christmas, and the true nature of the Christchild. In this remembering there is no longer any need to try to deny any of the realities of life, but rather to accept them in the dim faith that there is a divine hand at work in the midst of them.

Kaj Munk was a Danish resistance fighter during the Second World War. It so happened that he was also a little-known parish pastor who was arrested twice for his passionate preaching against the injustices of the Nazi regime. His sermons powerfully attracted both intelligentsia and labouring people into the underground resistance and the protecting of the Jews. His first arrest ended in a release from prison on Christmas Day 1944. His second ended in execution: Pastor Munk was dragged from his parsonage on New Year's day and found the next day in a ditch. In defiance of Nazi orders, 3000 people attended his private funeral service. In a sermon for the Sunday after Christmas, Kaj Munk described the true nature of Christmas and the true nature of the Christchild like this:

He is the world's saviour and Prince of Peace because he is the world's greatest warlord. Though there seems to be such a glaring contrast between the Christmas gospel and the first Sunday after Christmas, between the Christchild and the struggles of faith—in reality there is the closest connection. The pagan Christmas with eating and drinking and parties and family joy may be contained within the true Christmas, but it can never replace it. Jesus took interest in families, and attended parties—but he was always on his way to the cross. Certainly let us sing Christmas carols and eat turkey and play with children, but let us never forget that the coming of Christ to earth means dauntless struggle against evil. And when we kneel at the manger in something other than a sentimental mood, we become aware that one hand of the Christchild is open and kindly, and the other clenched in blood.

Joseph immediately had to face these realities too. The most stupendous event in his life had just taken place: his wife had borne their first child. He was far away from his kin and hearth, and had been brief host to some very mysterious guests bearing symbolic gifts of his child's life and mission. Hardly had the dust settled on their departure when Joseph was made to understand the unbelievable power of the threat that was raised against this newborn child: "Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." If Mary was not falling into a post-partum depression just because of the overwhelming hormone rush in her body, then Joseph's not-so-romantic nighttime whisperings that evening might have started the plunge! "Get ready my dear, dear mother of God, we are leaving for Egypt." "Not now, Joseph, I am weary; in the morning." "No, Mary my betrothed, the donkey is ready, I am ready, the baby is ready. God and all the angels are ready. We are going *now*."

And then Matthew skips over a whole bloody chapter of the nativity which the church has never forgotten and can never afford to forget, because it is reality, it is tragedy, it is the power of sin and death and evil wrought in the world by fundamental rebellion to God's love, it is awful and horrible and it is part of Christmas: the slaughter of the innocents, martyrs in deed if not in will, how many no one knows—2,000, 14,000? But if we begin to see the Christchild as the saviour with one hand clenched in blood, then the number mounts past the thousands to the millions of the Conventrys and Dresdens and Guernicas and Mai-Lais and Hiroshimas and Wounded Knees and Oradours and Lidices and Latvias and Dachaus and Auschwitzes and even the modern holocaust of 94,000 aborted children each year in Canada. If we love the Christchild let us also love the children he loves, and teach the children by example and discipline and prayer to love one another as God loves us. For the war against all that is good and worthwhile does not end with Christmas: it reaches a new intensity in which the open and kindly hand of the world's greatest warlord, Jesus of Nazareth, the chief weapon, extended in risk and love even though it be rejected, or nailed to a cross.

But how is this other way of celebration full of hope? How is it even possible to call it "celebration"? How is it possible to face and even welcome the doubts and questions, rather than try to hold them at bay so they don't "spoil Christmas"? Again Joseph supplies the example and Kaj Munk the words. For true Christmas joy is related to the true nature of the Christchild. God is not a great Santa Claus who has some kind of trick in his bag that allows us to be happy and in harmony with the world and ourselves all the time. True Christmas joy, no matter how much or how little of it we may understand or receive, means that we have Christ, and, like Joseph, that we go where he wants us to go. If it means getting up in the middle of the night and fleeing from the force of oppression like Joseph and Mary, or if it means struggling in the dark night of a Gethsemane with the will of God as death draws near, or if it means shedding a tear for a loved one on Christmas Day, true Christmas joy comes from one song, one carol in our hearts: "My Jesus, I want to be where thou wilt have me, and thou alone."

In such faith, time *is* stopped even as it is fully comprehended; the realities of death and life are *not* put on hold,

but overcome in grace and truth and eternal life. Just as God was working through the events of Herod and Joseph, so is God working through the events of our lives and times—to fulfil God's Word. And so we do not forget but remember, and remembering, we retell "the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favour he has shown according to his mercy, according to his steadfast love." Amen.