

The Symbols of Christmas

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Scripture Reading: John 1:14–18 (NIV)

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵ (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'")

¹⁶ Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.

¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.”

Introduction

Have you ever wondered what does the name “Christmas” mean? It is a term that comes from late old English meaning *Cristes mæsse*. Technically, Christmas is a “Church festival observed annually in memory of the birth of Christ.”

Christmas can also be a commercial season that starts in October. It is big money. Even atheists, Muslims etc. might sing, “What a friend we have in Jesus.” So here we have one word with 2 different applications. As for us, we are Christians and we celebrate Christmas differently to the world. It’s all about Jesus.

Last week we established that it is in order to celebrate Christmas, that Jesus was born on or close to 25 December, ruled Saturnalia and Sol Invictus out of Christian celebrations and made the statement that Christmas is pagan only if you intend to worship pagan gods.

Now our attention falls on the symbols we use at Christmas time. Someone once told me that not only is a Christmas tree evil – they quoted Jeremiah 10:3-4 – but every time we bend down to pick up a gift from under the tree, we are bowing down and worshipping the tree.

By extension of this logic, I bowed down and worshipped Lizette's dressing table this morning when I put on my running shoes and bowed down to the front gate soon afterwards when I took my running shoes off. As we said, Christmas is pagan only if you intend to worship pagan gods. Having said this, let's zoom in on some symbols of Christmas.

Symbolism

The guiding principle behind a symbol is that its meaning is determined by its present use and not according to its historical use or origin. In other words, if you use or put up a symbol, it is because it has a present meaning to you. You are therefore able to answer the question, "what does this mean to me?" And your answer will always be in the present, not in the past, since it is in the present where you live and use the symbol.

Let's work a bit with this fact. What does a swastika mean to most of the world? It is a reminder of the Nazi's of World War 2. But, the Nazis intended to use it as symbolic of bringing good times back to Germany. In reality though, the swastika was in use for over 5000 years before Adolf Hitler got hold of it. The word swastika comes from the Sanskrit "svastika," which means "good fortune" or "well-being." The hooked cross – currently – is a sacred symbol in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Odinism, so it is a commonplace sight on their temples and houses, particularly in India and Indonesia. So, the swastika means different things to different people, cultures and religions at different times.

Another example, in Greek mythology, Nike is the winged goddess of Victory. The logo is derived from goddess' wing, 'swoosh', which symbolises the sound of speed, movement, power and motivation. With what do you associate Nike with? Shoes & clothing or a goddess?

It is true that some Christian symbols are or were used in paganism, but this is certainly not the association a practising Christian has got to have with the symbol, and it is certainly not the only meaning that can be applied to a symbol.

Your use of symbols today must be evaluated on the basis of what they mean to you, today.

The Christmas Tree

Have you ever heard that Christmas trees are evil or forbidden or idolatrous based on Jeremiah 10:3-4, “This is what the LORD says: ‘For the practices of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter.’”

If ever, there was a search for the Scripture most quoted out of context, then this one must be on the short-list. A leading candidate. Jeremiah is referring to the creation of an idol, not a Christmas tree. In any case, Jeremiah 10:2-4 was written about 500 B.C. and about 2000 years before the first Christmas trees.

The Christmas tree originated from two Christian symbols found in homes at Christmas time. The first was a “paradise tree,” an evergreen tree on which apples were hung. This symbolized the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. The second symbol was a “Christmas pyramid,” a shelf holding Christmas figurines and decorated with a star. By about the 16th century these two symbols had been combined into the Christmas tree we know today.

At the same time though, we must also acknowledge that an evergreen tree is a long-held symbol of beauty, life and growth, for example:

- Psalm 1:3, “That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither-- whatever they do prospers.”
- Isaiah 60:13, “The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the juniper, the fir and the cypress together, to adorn my sanctuary; and I will glorify the place for my feet.”

Trees are not evil. The problem lay in what the tree represents to someone (i.e. what does it symbolize to them) and what the tree is made into, for example, an idol. If like we read in Jeremiah 10:3-4, an idol is made from a tree, then the idol, idol maker, false gods etc. are the problem, not the original tree.

Santa Claus. Santa Claus is a corruption of “Saint Nicholas,” possibly because of the Dutch “*Sinter Klaas*.” He wasn’t pagan, but a real historical 4th-century Christian figure who was known for his generosity. Nicholas gave three daughters of a poor man money by putting it in their stockings, which were drying by the fireplace. He was famous in his day for other acts of generosity – such as throwing bags of money into people's homes (and sometimes down their chimneys) under the cover of night. He also very strongly defending the deity of Jesus.

So Saint Nicholas was about giving gifts without expecting anything in return, a powerful reminder of the ultimate gift: God came to us who are completely undeserving of His boundless love, mercy and grace.

However, much mythology has in time surrounded the figure of Saint Nicholas and there are other associations too, such as Krampus.

My advice is to use Godly wisdom in deciding whether or not to include Santa Claus in your Christmas. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Children who believe that the gifts they receive Christmas morning are from a magical man with unending resources might not appreciate the gift, or in time, understand the sacrifices their parents make in providing them.
- There is always the possibility that Santa can cloud the gift of Christ to us through greed and materialism.

Children whose parents are on a tight budget may feel that they have been overlooked by Santa or even worse end up believing that they were “bad.”

Nativity Symbols

Stars. Luke 8:8 read, “And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.” In Matthew 2:1-2 we read of the wise men who came to worship Jesus, “...We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

Angels. The first part of Luke 8:9 reads, “An angel of the Lord appeared to them” and Luke 2:13, “Suddenly many other angels came down from heaven and joined in praising God” (CEV). The first angel announced the good news and all the angels praised God.

Coloured balls. Fruit trees should grow fruit. Christians should provide evidence of their salvation. Christians, according to John 15:16, have been chosen by Jesus to bear much-lasting fruit, in other words, the fruit of our salvation. There is, of course, the fruit of the Spirit that we should bear according to Galatians 5:22-23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...” We would not bear fruit if Jesus did not come to us.

Bells. Church bells call worshippers to the church, announce the fixed times of daily Christian prayer, and are rung on special occasions such as a wedding, or a funeral service. Bells make an announcement, even if to tell us it is 7 pm.

Lights and candles. We celebrate Christmas by stringing lights because the Light of the world has come to us (John 1:4; Isaiah 9:2). Jesus is the Light of the World (John 1:4-9).

Giving of gifts. This originated from both the gifts of the Magi of Matthew 2:11, “On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh” and from Saint Nicholas.

I can understand that with the commercialization of Christmas, one can become confused with gifting. Sadly, in this scenario, gifting is usually coupled to one’s financial ability or lack thereof.

Here is an evangelical suggestion, if you give a gift, give it with the Gospel and remind the receiver of the greatest gift ever, God to man, 2 Corinthians 9:15, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”

Snow and holly. Well, we are in the Southern Hemisphere, so snow and holly are not really a reminder of the season for us. But each to his own, I can grasp why snow and holly form part of Northern Hemisphere – cold climate symbolism.

Music. We celebrate Christmas with carols and choirs because they are expressive of joy and follow the examples of Mary and Zacharias and Simeon and the angels, all of whom extolled the Lord in poetry (Luke chapters 1–2).

CONCLUSION

We celebrate Christmas because, as the angel said, the birth of Jesus is “good news.” It is a joyous occasion! Good news is meant to be celebrated and expressed. Symbolism is part of our expression.

In celebrating Christmas, never lose sight of the fact that we needed deliverance. God got involved, He came in love to rescue us from certain death.

Amen.