

Problems about Christmas

IN an increasingly secular age, Christmas presents the church with certain serious problems of both a theological and a non-theological nature, in the strict sense of those terms. What follows can only be by way of an introduction, and while it is always easier to raise problems than to find answers for them, it is nevertheless no bad thing that we realise what some of the problems are, and sometimes in the very asking certain ways of answering appear. Firstly, three theological problems will be considered and here again only brief indications can be given, for each in itself constitutes a vast subject. Secondly, non-theological factors will be looked at under the broad heading of secularisation. Finally, I hope to draw two conclusions which should at all times govern all our thinking on the whole matter.

(1) The first of our three theological problems is that of the texts themselves, particularly those of Matthew and Luke which play a large part in our hymns and carols and church worship. The stories themselves are complex in origin, and many commentators would accept that both contain a large amount of secondary material ; Matthew and Luke appear to be drawing upon separate sources and the accounts given are widely divergent—each seems to have adapted his source to mirror his own understanding of Jesus Christ. Both place the birth of Jesus in the reign of Herod, and both say he was born at Bethlehem, but that is nearly the full extent of their agreement. Luke takes the presence of Mary and Joseph at Bethlehem as being accidental, and that it was due to an imperial census (itself questionable), while for Matthew they were at Bethlehem from the first and removed to Nazareth because of danger ; there is no hint of the manger and shepherds, and instead we hear of wise men from the east.

Secondly there is the inevitable problem of the Virgin Birth, and further the meaningfulness of the Incarnation as a term for today. Amongst Protestant theologians at least, Barth's exposition of the Virgin Birth is full and cogent, while on the other hand Brunner dismisses it. In terms of the New Testament itself, one could argue against the Virgin Birth (a) that there is no explicit mention of it save at Matt. 1. 18, and Luke 1. 34 (compare the patristic evidence at John 1. 13), (b) there are the almost irreconcilable differences between the two accounts of the birth, (c) Paul apparently could

expound a high Christology without recourse to it. On the other hand, one could argue in its favour, (a) both passages are essentially Jewish and it is impossible that it should have arisen unless based on fact, (b) it was well established before the end of the first century, (c) both Matthew and Luke give the impression that they are recounting familiar fact. Moreover, there is this additional problem of the relevance of the Incarnation for the world today, or rather how one is to interpret the tremendous paradox of the Incarnation in terms of the world today. What meaning does the Chalcedonian formulation have? Does it still have any meaning? What does Immanuel mean for the twentieth century? It seems to me at least, that there are tremendous problems here and there is much that must be re-thought and pondered over. On the other hand, some would object to all this and put it down to an inadequate grasp of the real meaning of the Incarnation or to a working with the wrong presuppositions and so on.

Thirdly, there is raised the whole general subject of the relation between faith and history, and on our answer to this, so far as one can find an answer, will depend our attitude toward the previous problems of the Virgin Birth and the Incarnation, and the relation of the whole to the New Testament texts themselves. Briefly, what does it mean to do one's exegesis of somewhat problematical texts such as we have here, and still hold to the present reality of the Christ of faith? It is a problem of certainty that is raised here, and it is an acute one. To put it bluntly, what does it mean for one's faith if one does not believe, say, in the Virgin Birth; or what does it mean if one decides after careful consideration of Mark 9. 1 that Jesus may well have been wrong—does our view of the Incarnation rule this out *a priori*, as impossible, or is it that after all we do not have a large enough Incarnation doctrine? Perhaps this is felt to be going too far, but on this problem of certainty, may I quote two people who take up different views—Vincent Taylor and Gunther Bornkamm? Taylor writes "I may perhaps be permitted after many years of unremitting study in the basement of the temple of faith humbly to affirm the conviction of moral certainty, and I doubt if I could have obtained it in any other way than by that of critical research". On the other hand, in his introduction to "Jesus of Nazareth" Bornkamm writes "certainly faith cannot and should not be dependent on the change and uncertainty of historical research". That there can ultimately be no distinction between the Jesus of

history and the Christ of faith I firmly believe to be the case, and this M. Kähler pointed out at an early stage, but there is a tension as to how we are to hold them together, and that tension is not at its slackest at Christmas time when he who is the Christ, the Son of God, was born a man among men into and amid all the chances and changes of history.

It may be that these three problems briefly outlined above are special ones, that is, more pressing upon the minister than upon the average member of his congregation, but problems they are nevertheless—and how they are faced up to and pondered over will affect one's whole theology; and a minister's theology is something, I imagine, which he uses in some way or another almost every day.

(2) The second main subject outlined at the beginning was the non-theological one and this was to be discussed under the broad heading of secularisation, taking theological in the strict sense of the term. Firstly, there is the secularism of the world at large—this is becoming increasingly evident as year succeeds year; perhaps something in the apparent decline of the church has something to do with it, but the true meaning of Christmas would seem slowly and surely to be edged out of the picture. Christmas time in Edinburgh is an example of what obtains all over—having passed the crib at the east end of Princes Street, one encounters a constant barrage of Santa Clauses and reindeer on one's way toward the west end, all smiling benevolently at the passer by and wishing him a Merry Christmas. Not that this is wrong in itself, but we are living in a truly secular age where in the popular mind at least, the event of the Christ child is reduced to being on a par with the tales of Santa, reindeer and the rest. This, I am sure will get a good deal worse; several people, I know, will argue that this is a good thing, and that the church is always at its best when having to fight—be that as it may, it is a real problem, and the more secular the world becomes, the more the Christian will be forced to ask what Christmas really means anyway, and how best he can remember and live out that meaning. Secondly, there is the need to recognise that we ourselves are secular—too often we gauge our lives in terms of getting and spending, and most of all at Christmas; we give to those who give to us and write to those who write to us, and that is that. This could easily develop into a sermon, but suffice it to say that secularism is a problem not only outside the church; and it is one with which the minister must wrestle in his own congregation and in his own heart. With all this emphasis from the secular,

there often comes a feeling of sentimentality of a wrong kind—here once again we seem to be returning to the theological area, but too often we ponder over Christmas and quite forget about Easter, forget all that is involved in the Christ event, forget about judgment and costliness. This is perhaps a result of the process of secularism, and it is one which minister and church member alike will neglect at his peril.

(3) In conclusion there are, I think, two things which must govern our thinking at all times. Firstly, we have been considering problems, but here ultimately we are faced with a mystery—and it is of the essence of mystery that the more it is penetrated, the greater the mystery becomes. Moreover, it is one of the great merits of Chalcedon that it left the mystery of the Incarnation to interpret itself, the fathers defining the mystery of Christ's person in the only way they could, in terms of what it was not. Again, because it is a mystery, all our judgments are themselves under the judgment of God and all our words are subject to Him who is the Word. We cannot hold ourselves back from encounter with him, for he encounters us—we must learn (precisely because we must and should take them seriously) to leave off our pondering of problems, else it were very blasphemy to seek to keep on questioning in the presence of the ultimate reality which questions us. Rather we must learn to go ever and again to the manger cradle, to kneel with the shepherds and the wise men, and to worship the Christ child. Secondly, we must always keep in mind the whole person of Jesus Christ ; God's very coming at Christmas is both judgment and salvation, and the light that illumines the cradle is the light that streams from the Cross and Resurrection. Christ is born to save, born to die and rise again, and only in him is this possible since it is Christ who is born.

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