

SERMON 'SOME CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS'

If I say the word "Christmas", what is the first image that immediately occurs to you?

Some possibilities are:

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Christmas tree

Decorations on the tree

Other decorations

The figure of Santa Claus / Father Christmas

Christmas crackers

Advent

Advent candles

Advent calendars

Nativity scenes

John *Martin's Christmas Pageant in Adelaide

The service of Nine Lessons and Carols from
King's College, Cambridge

Gifts

Christmas stockings

Christmas cards

Carol services

Carols by Candlelight

Other traditions, perhaps within your own
family.

I want today to look at just some of these, in no particular order.

Will you be hanging up a stocking on Christmas Eve, for Father Christmas to fill?

If so, where will you hang it? On the mantelpiece?
On the end of your bed? Somewhere else?

And what sort of stocking? Will it be a 15-denier lady's nylon? Or a pair of panty-hose, with two stocking legs to be filled? Probably not. More likely is a cardboard back, and red net front. Hard to imagine anyone wearing such things.

I get the impression that not many people today actually Use stockings, but simply arrange the gifts under the Christmas tree. My own family's tradition in Adelaide was individually labeled pillow cases, on chairs in the living room. Pillow cases hold more than the average stocking or sock.

Stockings seem to be retained as a tradition, a piece of the fairy tale - although people did hang up stockings once upon a time:- back in the days when a child might be happy to find a fresh orange, a little bag of nuts, and a new ha-penny: Ah, but - as Grandma might say - that was when Christmas was really Christmas, not like it is now!

Christmas trees? Real or artificial?

If a real one: the Norway Spruce, which is notorious for shedding its needles?

Or alternatives, like the Nordman, or Scots Pine, or Serbian Spruce, or Blue Spruce?

The decorations on the tree? Tinsel, streamers, baubles.

Lights, which were originally candles - dangerous! On top' of the tree-will there be a star? Or a fairy / angel (in an uncomfortable position!)?

What about the figure of Santa Claus, dressed in red with white fur trim, and white flowing beard? That was the creation of Swedish artist Haddon Sundblom in the 1930s, commissioned by the Coca-Cola Company. Those of you who are well over 60 may remember that, before the 1930s, Santa was portrayed as a pixie, or an elf, not a jolly fat man.

Father Christmas, of course, doesn't appear in the traditional Nativity scenes, which range from small ones made of cardboard to the life-size ones sometimes seen in church-yards, or city squares, or big shop windows. The jolly fat man, with his reindeer and sleigh, somehow doesn't fit in with the three magi, and the shepherds, and the animals, although in various guises and by various names he is part of Christmas celebrations around the world.

Let me share with you what John Knowles, Chapel-Keeper at Upper Chapel in Sheffield for several years at the beginning of my ministry there, reckoned was a tradition in Sheffield:

Men who don't normally go into pubs get woolly pullovers and boxes of cigars as Christmas gifts, and then go to the pub for a drink. The problem, said John, was that pub regulars like him couldn't get in, because the pubs were full of strange men in new woolly pullovers, smoking big cigars!

Christmas trees as a focus of decoration in the home:- or church or elsewhere -- seem to date from the mid-19th century, along with much of the Victorian, British Christmas tradition generated by Charles Dickens and Prince Albert.

When I was at the F^rancis Street Church, we usually had a tree, in the manse upstairs, and/or the church downstairs. One tree, in a pot, did service for many years.

In the church one year, we had a large tree, which filled the corner by the pulpit. The church was used by a Free Synagogue. Rabbi George Ruben almost had a fit when he walked in on the Friday evening! The tree - fully decorated, with lights and everything - had to go! It was pagan, not even Christian!

Eventually we reached a compromise: we draped the tree in a double-bed sheet, and Rabbi George was able to proceed with his service.

I suppose it was fortunate that we were at home, and could provide a sheet. I sometimes wonder what the good Rabbi might have done otherwise.

The turkey, of course, did not originate from Turkey. It originated from Mexico, and was first taken to England in the 16th century by a Yorkshire-man, William Strickland. If you know your Dickens, the goose was the favoured Christmas poultry - but turkeys are better for modern farming methods.

And the Christmas pudding - or plum porridge as it once was - used to include meat, along with wine, sherry, lemon, orange juice, currants, cloves, cinnamon, and brown bread.

The practice of putting coins in the pudding (silver only!) is thought to have come from the practice of adding a pea and a bean into a cake on Twelfth Night, when a lucky couple would become king and queen for the night. Mince pies, too, used to contain meat. They were originally mutton pies, with finely minced mutton as the main ingredient. But the mutton was supplemented by the dried fruit, which kept better in the alcoholic preservative which gradually replaced the meat. -

The most famous mince pie is the one eaten by Little Jack Horner, sat in his corner!

But: As Tevye in "The Fiddler on the Roof" would say:
Tradition!

Australia's early British settlers - like most people who migrate to a new country - tried to maintain their British Christmas traditions. One such tradition was the full hot roast meal, with all the trimmings; preceded by hot tomato soup, and followed by hot Christmas pudding with brandy sauce. Fine in Britain, in winter. Very warming, as well as filling.

But imagine: 100 degrees Fahrenheit; sun beating down on corrugated iron roof of lean-to kitchen; wood stove, burning all morning; and the woman of the house in a long black dress, with long sleeves and high collar - not to mention the stays and petticoats underneath!

But Christmas wasn't Christmas if you didn't have the traditional Christmas lunch!

My family was more into cold meats and salads, and ice cream / cold sweets, although Christmas pudding was often part of the meal. But I have also endured Christmas with friends who insisted on serving the "proper" food.

Do you think of Advent Calendars, with the windows to be cut and opened, one each day?

Do you think of Advent Candles? They don't seem to be much used in Unitarian churches.

Do you think of the Christmas Eve service of nine lessons and carols, from Kings College, Cambridge - right next to my daughter Elizabeth's Gonville and Caius College?

Millions of people around the world will listen to this year's service on the radio or watch it on television. It has provided a model for many other services of lessons and carols in cathedrals and in village churches.

I remember: forty years ago, Christmas Eve, Carol Service in King's Chapel, Boston, Mass., 10.30 pm. Packed crowd - many wearing red and green: tartan ties, waistcoats, scarves. Professional musicians, performing difficult, unfamiliar pieces. It was a major event on the social calendar in Boston. But

it was, and felt like, a performance; it did not feel like an occasion of worship.

Will you attend a carol service? If you do, will it be held inside, or - more likely - outside as a "Carols by Candlelight"? Carols by Candlelight take place in local parks in cities, towns and suburbs across the country.

As a child in Adelaide, it was at the Lockleys Reserve, with a large tree - decorated each year with strings of coloured lights in a bell shape, which became an annual landmark. There were carols, candles, refreshments (I have memories of raspberry cordial), and Father Christmas would arrive, on a fire engine, or the back of a ute.

Here in the Domain, it was a big occasion when our children were little. There were thousands of people, having picnic meals, followed by the carols, with well-known singers and TV stars. The candles were sold to raise funds for charity.

Stockings, full of gifts

Advent Calendars and Advent Candles

Services of nine lessons and carols, and other carol services

Carols by Candlelight

Christmas cards

Christmas trees, and decorations: tinsel, streamers, bright baubles, coloured lights, and stars and-angels

Santa Claus or Father Christmas, all red suit and white fur trim, and jolly ho-ho-ho and reindeer and sleigh and overflowing sackful of toys. Nativity scenes with magi and shepherds and animals Traditional, predictable gifts; and sometimes unexpected gifts that reflect great love and thoughtfulness

Food: lots of it , particularly rich and fattening
- often a prelude to New Year Resolutions!
Turkey, pudding and so on
Alternatives, such as cold meats and salads, or
vegetarian
Mince pies.

That's only a short, incomplete list of just some
of our Christmas traditions -- what G M Caple calls
"the accretions of the centuries,... the half-pagan
observances,... the whirl of meaningless activity."

But, behind it all:

I finish with G M Caple's poem, "The Essence":

Discard the myths and legends for what they are:
Strip away the accretions of the centuries;
Abandon the traditional half-pagan observances,
The feasting and drinking,
The spurious goodwill,
The alcoholic bonhomie;
End the materialism,
The commercialism,
The whole whirl of meaningless activity.

And what will remain?

With unimagined clarity
There will be experienced
An intermission,
A quietness,
A stillness of the spirit.
A strong awareness
Of the infiltration of human life
By some divine essence.
Bringing with it
An indescribable peace
Which is at once the mystery
And the reality
That is called Christmas.

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