

Has Christmas been Hijacked?

Text: Matthew 21:33-41

Introduction:

Allow me to begin with an explanation and a caveat. If you see little or no relationship between the title of the sermon, “Has Christmas been Hijacked”, and the text you are an observing person and correct in your assumption. There isn’t any connection at all in a strictly biblical-historical sense. Jesus was certainly not thinking about his birthday when he told this parable, but about the impending events of his last week in Jerusalem when he would be rejected by the leaders of the people to whom he was presenting himself as their legitimate Messiah king, handed over to the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, and crucified on a roman cross.

What I propose to do this morning is, then, somewhat in violation of my own self-imposed principles. I have understood my gift and calling to be an explainer and teacher of the Bible. I have the unwavering conviction that it is the Word that creates us and not we who create the Word. Therefore, what I have always tried to do in preaching and teaching is to explain the Scriptures in the context in which they were written and let them speak for themselves. The power to transform lives is in the Word of God not in any human words spoken about the Word.

Why then do I violate my own principles? I do so because I want to speak about Christmas, and Christmas is not biblical. The birth of Jesus is biblical; it is recorded in detail in both Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospels, but Christmas, the celebration of that birthday, is not. Jesus never told us to give him a birthday party every year. In fact, he didn’t even let us know for sure the day on which his birthday falls. He did tell us to celebrate his death by regularly coming to his table for communion, and he told us to celebrate both his death and resurrection by initiating new believers into his family by baptism. While we have no direct command to do so, it also appears that the early Christians celebrated his resurrection by making the first day of the week their special day to meet and worship, and that once a year, from the beginning, they remembered his resurrection in a special way by celebrating Easter, on a day that was known to be the day on which he arose from the dead. But, at the beginning, there was no birthday celebration. The church fathers of the first three centuries make no mention of any special observation of the nativity, and it was only in the sixth century that all Christians settled on the date of December 25th as the date of Christmas.

When Christmas did begin to be celebrated, its roots, were double. It was based partially upon the Gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus, but it also drew from the pagan celebrations of the winter solstice. For this reason some Christians have always raised a voice of protest against all Christmas celebrations. The Puritans, for example, in both England and America, banned Christmas, not so much because it was

unbiblical, but because the Christian celebration had come to lack decorum. One Puritan historian writes:

“Our Christmas lords of misrule, together with dancing, masks, mummeries, stage-players, and such other Christmas disorders, now in use with Christians, were derived from these Roman Saturnalia and Bacchanalian festivals, which should cause all pious Christians to eternally abominate them.” (Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix*, cited in McClintock, Strong: *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. II. P. 276)

The customs of Christmas, not being for the most part biblically derived, have varied widely through time and space. Our current Christmas customs in America date mostly from the Victorian era. Queen Victoria was, for example, the first English monarch to have a Christmas tree. According to historian Ronald Hutton, the current state of the observance of Christmas is largely the result of a mid-Victorian revival of the holiday spearheaded by Charles Dickens. In *A Christmas Carol*, he argues that Dickens sought to construct Christmas as a family-centered festival of generosity, in contrast to the community-based and church-centered observations, the observance of which had dwindled during the late 19th century. (cited in *Christmas Controversy*, Wikipedia).

Thesis:

Before you begin to associate me with Ebenezer Scrooge, let me move on to the point that I want to make, not from a primary interpretation of the text we have read, but from a secondary application. My point is that Christmas has been hijacked. To hijack is to take a vehicle of conveyance that belongs to someone else and use it for one's own purposes with no concern for the safety of the rightful users. The idea fits what has happened to Christmas as it is currently celebrated in the Western world.

Text:

To help you see how Jesus' parable of the wicked husbandmen relates to the hijacking of Christmas allow me retell it in the following manner:

There was once a kind man, the mayor of a small town, and the owner of the factory which employed many of the town's citizens, who in order to show his appreciation to the citizens of his town for their hard work and good citizenship, decided to invite the entire town to his birthday party. He was a man of some means, and by nature generous, so he went to great lengths to make the party an unforgettable experience for all of the citizens of his town, many of whom were poor and rarely ate the finest foods or participated in anything much other than hard work. He had the best of food in abundance, wonderful games, and entertainment. The party lasted until early morning, and all agreed that it was the best party that they had ever attended. In the days that followed they heaped praise upon the mayor for his largess, and thanked him profusely for his kindness.

The mayor was so moved by the reaction of the people that he decided to make the party an annual affair. Each year he went to even greater lengths to bring some joy into the difficult lives of his hard-working constituents and employees. As the years went by, however, the attitude of the people began to change. They began to consider the mayor's birthday party as something that was owed to them. Instead of thanking the mayor they began, first to make suggestions, and then demands, as to how he could improve the party. Finally, one year they sent a delegation to the mayor to tell him that they could do a better job of organizing his party than he, and that they would appreciate it if he would just fund the party and let them organize it. In fact, one of the delegation was so brazen as to suggest that the best thing would be for him to create a trust fund that would fund the party indefinitely, then move away from the town and just not bother them anymore. He concluded his request, without even mustering much tact, by saying: "you see mayor, we really like your party, but we don't care much about you". The mayor had been disinvented to his own birthday. Are you surprised that he canceled the party, closed his factories that had provided employment for the population of the town and moved away in hopes of finding a more congenial town where he could invest his means?

The purpose of a parable is to catch us by surprise. That is the reason that when Jesus told the story of the wicked husbandmen, and closed by asking his audience: "When the lord therefore of the vineyard comes, what will he do unto those husbandmen? Before they had time to see themselves in the story, they had already responded: "He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their season."

Are there any surprising parallels between the retold parable and our own celebration of Christmas, the main purpose of which has become, not to celebrate the coming into the world of Jesus Christ as our savior and hope, but the greasing of our retail economy.

I recently discovered a story by C. S. Lewis that, as far as I know, has never been published in any of his books. He wrote it over fifty years ago, but it is uncanny how he had already grasped the problem even then. In the story he signals a distinct split between two Christmases, one religious, the other secular. The title is *Xmas and Christmas a Lost Chapter from Herodotus*. It is a satire of the observance of two simultaneous holidays in "Niatirb" (Britain backwards) from the supposed viewpoint of the ancient Greek historian and traveler. I don't have time to read it all, but I will summarize it and quote some significant passages. Remember, he is speaking of two separate holidays celebrated simultaneously. He begins with Herodotus' description of "exmas". He says that the festival *Rush* begins about 50 days before the festival itself with the sending of cards with winter scenes to all of one's friends and relatives. I quote:

"And because all men must send these cards the marketplace is filled with the crowds of those buying them, so that there is great labour and weariness. But having bought as many as they suppose to be sufficient, they return to their houses and find there the cards which others have sent to them. And when they find cards from any to whom they also have sent cards, they throw them away and give thanks to the gods that this labour at least is over for another year. But when they find cards from any to whom they have not sent , then they beat their breasts

and wail and utter curses against the sender; and, having sufficiently lamented their misfortune, they put on their boots again and go out into the fog and rain to buy a card for him also.”

From card sending he moves to a description of their gift giving. Remember this was written at least fifty years ago.

“They also send gifts to one another, suffering the same things about the gifts as the cards, or even worse. For every citizen has to guess the value of the gift which every friend will send to him so that he may send one of equal value, whether he can afford it or not. And they buy such gifts for one another such things as no man ever bought for himself. For the sellers, understanding the custom, put forth all kinds of trumpery, and whatever, being useless and ridiculous, they have been unable to sell throughout the year they now sell as an Exmas gift. And though the Niatirbians profess themselves to lack sufficient necessary things, such as metal, leather, wood and paper, yet an incredible quantity of these things is wasted every year, being made into gifts.”

Finally, he describes the festival day of Exmas.

“But when the day of the festival comes, then most of the citizens, being exhausted with the *Rush*, lie in bed till noon. But in the evening eat five times as much supper as on other days and, and crowning themselves with crowns of paper, they become intoxicated. And on the day after Exmas they are very grave, being internally disordered by the supper and the drinking and reckoning how much they have spent for gifts and on the wine. For wine is so dear among the Niatirbians that a man must swallow the worth of a talent before he is well intoxicated.”

Herodotus having thus described the majority festival of Exmas turns his attention to the minority festival of Crissmas:

“But the few among the Niatirbians have also a festival, separate and to themselves, called Crissmas, which is on the same day as Exmas. And those who keep Crissmas, doing the opposite of the majority of the Niatirbians, rise early on that day with shining faces and go before sunrise to certain temples where they partake of a sacred feast. And in most of the temples they set out images of a fair woman with a new-born Child on her knees and certain animals and shepherds adoring the child. (The reason of these images is given in a certain sacred story which I know but do not repeat.)”

“But I myself conversed with a priest in one of these temples and asked him why they kept Crissmas on the same day as Exmas; for it appeared to me inconvenient. But the priest replied, “It is not lawful, O stranger, for us to change the date of Crissmas, but would that Zeus would put it into the minds of the Niatirbians to keep Exmas at some other time or not to keep it at all. For Exmas and the *Rush*, he replied, distract the minds even of the few from sacred things. And we indeed are glad that men should make merry at Crissmas; but in Exmas there is no merriment left.” And when I asked him why they endured the *Rush*, he replied, “It is, O

Stranger, a racket”; using (as I suppose) the words of some oracle and speaking unintelligibly to me (for a racket is an instrument which the barbarians use in a game called tennis).

Having described Exmas and Crissmas, Herodotus thus concludes:

“But what Hecataeus says, that Exmas and Crissmas are the same, is not credible. For first, the pictures which are stamped on the Exmas-cards have nothing to do with the sacred story which the priests tell about Crissmas. And , secondly, the most part of Niatirbians, not believing the religion of the few, nevertheless send the gifts, and cards and participate in the *Rush* and drink, wearing paper caps. But it is not likely that men, even being barbarians, should suffer so many and great things in honour of a god they do not believe in. And now, enough about Niatirb.”

Conclusion

Well it seems that those of us in the minority, who still celebrate Christmas, but find that our Christian Holy Day has been hijacked by a secular mob who still wants the party, but don't know, or want to know the host, have some decisions to make. The normal reaction to a hijacking is to keep quiet, make yourself as invisible as possible, go along with the hijackers, and hope that in the end they will get what they want and return your vehicle. Experience proves that that is rarely the case. In the end what we need is courage; courage to challenge those who have taken what never belonged to them, for ends that were never intended. In our case it would be easy to say: “Does it really matter that much, after all. It's just a holiday, let them celebrate it the way they want to.” I propose that Christmas is worth fighting for, for at least two reasons.

First, for the sake of the children. In the Bible, the main reason God gave Israel feasts and fetes was so that they would have opportunities to remind the new generations of his great acts of the past, so that the new generation would have the opportunity to come to know the living God who acts on behalf of his people. Children are by nature greedy, for they are human, and their human nature is in its raw and unrefined state. When all around them says that Christmas is about greed and getting, we pander to the worst in them, rather than confronting them with the transforming Word, who became incarnate at Christmas, and who is capable of transforming the Ebenezer Scrooge in all of us into the generous and loving being that we were created to be. So, at least, for the sake of the children, let us bolster our courage and say to our hijackers: “Enough, we are taking back our ship.”

Secondly, we must not overly blame the hijackers. Even Dickens taught us that Ebenezer Scrooge doesn't have to remain Ebenezer Scrooge. The real message of Christmas is a message of hope. We do not have to remain the victims of our appetites and greed. “The Word became flesh” in order that humans might once again become human, that we might be liberated from the passions and sins that bind us and cause us to corrupt even the most holy of things. So, for the sake of our hijackers we must find the courage to open our mouths and again tell them the ancient story that brings joy, not a hangover, and hope, not buyer's remorse. Rather than giving in, and giving up and joining the unhappy throng in the Exmas Rush, let us rediscover and reaffirm the ancient and most holy celebration of the birthday of the unique Savior.