

We Can No Longer Ignore the Christmas Fantasy

In many ways, modern society demands that we should be successes. We are supposed to be those who by our determination or personality make our own destiny and triumph over all that life throws at us so that we succeed and prosper.

The message is everywhere. In films, our heroes demonstrate invulnerable perfection and flawless ability.

They crash cars at speed, climb out of the wreckage, flick off a few fragments of dust from their suit, straighten their tie and stroll away. They are fluent in whatever language is needed, never fumble in their handling of technology, and are always cool and collected. They never mistype web addresses, dial the wrong phone number or forget where they put the car keys.

Advertisements hammer home the message at a more domestic level: Everywhere we see smiling families of happy people in designer clothes enjoying cars and holidays. We ought to be perfect, we need to be a winner, and only losers mess up.

The fantasy that we can play the game of life with total success peaks at Christmas.

Many of us receive those depressing Christmas letters from friends that read like some kind of Annual Review for shareholders in which achievements are played up, disappointments are minimized and disasters are conveniently omitted. We hear at length of the writers' successful half-marathon, the successes of their children at school, their newfound attainment of Thai cooking, the bliss of those two weeks in the Mediterranean, their delight in their new conservatory. On reading their achievements, we can only feel

like life's underachievers.

More troubling still is what we might call the *Fantasy Christmas*. No doubt based on an original idea by Charles Dickens, it has been boosted by innumerable bad Christmas cards, decades of syrupy films and limitless amounts of advertising. Although we recognize it as a cliché, the Fantasy Christmas is something that many of us have come to believe in and even hope for. In Fantasy Christmas, there is a large room whose walls and bookshelves are festooned with Christmas cards and decorations.

At the back of the room a fire flickers. On one side is a real Christmas tree endowed with color-coordinating decorations and twinkling lights, while on the other stands a multicolored tower of presents. Through the window we can glimpse a gentle snowscape. In the middle of the room is a table piled high with food and drink, around which an entire family sits, laughing, smiling and joking together.

Fantasy Christmas admits no possibility that anything will be less than perfect. The turkey will be cooked exactly right, everybody will like everything (including the Brussels sprouts), the dog will not chew the presents, the broadband won't suddenly give up when we're Skyping Auntie Mollie in Australia, and everybody will get exactly the present they wanted.

Here in the world of Fantasy Christmas, no one will snap at each other, suffer from stress, flu or have the slightest worry about how, come January, they're going to pay for it all. And with Fantasy Christmas we know that there will be that moment late in the evening, when peace has descended, where we will be able to sink into the sofa, stare at the flames of the fire and rejoice in all that life is for us. And there we may even let our minds drift to all that we will achieve in the New Year because there, too, perfection will reign. But that's tomorrow's fantasy.

Unfortunately, there are serious problems with the fantasy view of Christmas. The most obvious is that to put our faith in it is to almost guarantee disappointment. The reality is inevitably going to be very different. We will probably give someone a DVD they already have, the kids will squabble, we will be endlessly reminded that it was us who forgot to buy the brandy butter, and worst and most poignant of all, there may be an empty seat at the table. Life has a habit of puncturing the balloon of perfection.

Yet there is another and more subtle problem with buying into the fantasy on offer at this time of year. The God of the Bible seems to prefer to work when things aren't perfect. In a phrase, God seems to be present in messes more than successes.

Consider the first Christmas. Has it ever struck you that, from the human point of view, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is a mess?

There's a bullying tax demand from a thuggish occupying power, an extremely awkward pregnancy at a time and place when society knew exactly what to do with bad girls, accommodation so rudimentary that you were as likely to call the vet as the midwife. And just when everybody present might have thought that things couldn't get any more undignified than a baby in an animal food trough, in shuffle a rustic bunch of shepherds complete, presumably, with rural smells and country muck. Oh the first Christmas was a long, long way from perfection. In fact, there's only one place in the Bible that's messier than Bethlehem, and that's the cross.

The messiness of Bethlehem is no accident. It's in the messes that God is most able to help us. Perfect people in perfect situations all too easily overlook the fact that they need God. Jesus said, "For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Matt. 9:13).

He might as well have said, "I didn't come to call those who

have got it right, I came to call those who are in a mess.” Those whose Christmases—and lives—are in disrepair are those most likely to listen to God.

This great turning-everything-upside-down principle of Christmas is actually the heart of the message of Christmas. It is in fact announced in the very first chapter of Luke’s Gospel where, in what has become called the *Magnificat*, Mary sings this of God:

“He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has pulled down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty” (Luke 1:51-53).

Christmas is a time when the have-nots can rejoice over the have-everythings; when those with flawed lives can find themselves more blessed than those with apparently perfect ones.

I wish you the very best possible Christmas and the best possible 2016. May your Christmas tree lights work the first time, may you get every present right, may this Christmas give you happy memories that will endure for a lifetime, and in the New Year may you get all of what you hope for and none of what you fear. But if things aren’t as perfect as you would like, be comforted. In Christ, God comes to us at Christmas and in the long run—and no long run extends further than eternity—it’s no bad thing for events to force us to turn to Him. After all, God’s reality is better than the best Fantasy Christmas.

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