

TWO CONTRASTING BUT COMPLEMENTARY APPROACHES TO CHRISTMAS

B) Does celebrating Christmas really change anything?

Words from a wise old Jesuit, Joseph Moingt, who lived to 104



Adoration of the Magi by Sandro Botticelli (D. R. photo / Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy).

And so Christmas is come...and gone (even if Christmastide is still very much with us)!

The birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the one who is called the Messiah, is a great celebration for Christians.

But basically, what does the birth of this child change for our world?

Not much... and yet everything!

*At least that's what **Joseph Moingt** believed. The French Jesuit priest and theologian was 104 years old when he died in 2019.*

Moingt did his doctoral thesis at the Institut Catholique in Paris under the direction of fellow Jesuit and future cardinal, Jean Daniélou. And then he worked alongside another Jesuit theologian who would eventually get the red hat, as well – Henri de Lubac.

*Before his death, Father Moingt shared his thoughts on Christmas with the magazine *La Croix*.*

La Croix: Why are there not four accounts of the birth of Jesus?

Joseph Moingt: It's true, there is no nativity story in two of the four Gospels. And with only one exception, the epistles make no mention of the Nativity.

This silence is astonishing if we think of how dogma of the Incarnation will become important very quickly and very early.

What are we to make of this?

It is a sign that the first Christian preaching did not revolve around Christmas, but around Easter. What is at centre is the dying and rising of Christ.

It is only later that the evangelists will ask, "This Jesus, where does he come from?"

Even though they are placed at the beginning of the Gospel accounts, the infancy narratives are not really the beginning. They come after a reflection on the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

It is the end of the story of Jesus that raises questions about his beginning. In these accounts, we see a sky that opens up, angels that speak to the shepherds, a star that guides the magi...

Why this recourse to marvels and wonders?

First, we must affirm that Christianity is not born through marvels and wonders, as we tend to say.

One does not come to faith through marvels and wonders. Christian faith is born at the foot of the cross, as Paul never stops repeating. We must read the Gospel accounts of the Nativity as symbolic stories.

Marvels and wonders are a sign of meditating on the scriptures. They are all saying: "Here is the fulfillment of the prophecies, here is what we have been waiting for".

It is the symbol of an intelligent faith seeking understanding.

The marvels and wonders do not diminish the importance of these accounts. If we are able to decipher them, they say that this child does not come from humankind, but from God.

What can we do with marvels and wonder that no longer make sense today?

Today, people are sceptical of wonders. But these marvellous stories resemble other writings from the time of Jesus, both Jewish and pagan, that tell of the birth of an important person.

It must be pointed out that the Church has rejected a lot of these marvels and wonders. The apocryphal gospels, which contain a great deal of that sort of thing, were not accepted as Holy Scripture. The meaning of Christmas is not found in the marvels and wonders.

If we had been present at the birth of Jesus, we would have seen a birth like any other. We would not even have asked ourselves about that father who was next door!

To understand the nativity, we must see the child in the manger and hear the words of Paul: "Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped" (Philippians 2, 6).

Thus, the manger is the very image of the cross which shows the abasement of God.

This is not always easy to hear in the Christmas season! Does Christmas change anything?

At Christmas, Christ is announced as Emmanuel, "God-with-us". This is an ancient expression that comes from the Old Testament. Already the Jews were saying, "Our God is a God who comes near".

But the question remained, "How close does God come?"

Already, from the beginning, God inhabits the story of humanity; God is in the creation.

But with Jesus, God is linked to the history of humankind; God accepts being subjected to history and not dominating it from above. God is not the God of heaven, infinitely distant from us. God is "for us".

Christmas changes the identity of God.

God demonstrates the capacity to become human, and even of being made by a human, of suffering from humanity. The greatness of God is not outside our limits, it is to arise within our limits and to make them burst.

Christmas shows how much we mean to God.

Is God concerned about humankind?

Yes, since the foundation of the world, God is concerned with coming to us to free us from death.

The novelty of Christmas is that God, by giving us this child, allows us to become God's children, that is to say, to participate in the eternal life of God.

This is what the image of the open sky in the Nativity stories reveals. God breaks through the veil that separated us from God.