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Finding Christ at Christmas

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Just Catholic

"I mean no disrespect," the student asked in class, "but, did Jesus really exist?"

Hate to say it, but real or not Jesus is rapidly fading from the scene. Today's culture wars take direct aim at Christianity. Try finding religious Christmas cards. Or, check out your choices for an Amazon gift card. Snow flakes, trees, birds, but no Mary, no Magi, no Jesus.

It's a difficult story, after all. Without some reinforcement these days it gets even harder.

History says Jesus really did live and die, and gained a lot of followers. But historians don't agree on other parts of the story, especially the details of his birth and resurrection.

You can see the problem. What if over two billion people are mistaken? There was a Jesus in history, but, was he God come into history as Christ to redeem humanity? And, if no Christ, then what is Christianity? Are Christians mere misguided fools living out a myth? Are the disagreements about Nativity scenes in town squares all for nothing? Is any of it real?

These questions underlie the sadness of our damaged world. If there never was a Christ then there is no Jesus now. Who cares that nearly half the planet -- more than three billion people -- lives on less than \$2.50 a day? What matter the billion the United Nations counts who have no proper food or water? Let someone else take care of it, the cynic says.

The United Nations with its agencies does what it can, and missionaries toil where things are worst: in India, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and Ethiopia. Every so often a newspaper runs a feature about a hospital in Zimbabwe, or a new school or sewer in East Timor.

Some folks also try to help, but most live quiet lives within their own parameters. They're beaten down by something in the air, and this year it's not Christmas. The red haze of anger hangs over every interaction. Passive aggressive professionals don't return phone calls. Drivers honk and give rude salutes. Salespeople grunt, customers are curt.

I've asked myself and others too many times for counting: what is everybody so mad about?

Psychologists have all sorts of explanations. As tissue paper and bills mount up, so do insecurities. Rancid hope becomes anxiety. Faith hardens into righteousness. Slander replaces charity. Then, add the nagging fear, the question in the middle of the night. Was there a Christ? What if it is not true?

I think that's what it is. I think the lack of hope belies a failure to believe. You know for sure in recent years church hierarchy has been no help. If they lied and covered up the scandals, here, there, and everywhere, what else is false, what else is fraud? Did Jesus really exist?

Well, yes, he did, and yes he does. We look for proof of Christ in many different places, none of them where he is. If we spend too much time looking in ancient Palestine, we won't see the rest of history. If we demand the documentary evidence about Bethlehem, we forget what's going on next door.

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Christ lived, and yes, Christ died, and Christ lives today in his resurrection. His life in every Christian is how he lives in history, and how he lives next door. Of course the hierarchy has fouled up the story. Pope Benedict is on the mark now, with very little very late. He says, in his Christmas message, "We must ask ourselves what was wrong in our proclamation, in our whole way of living the Christian life, to allow such a thing to happen."

Despite its foibles, despite its weaknesses, the church we see in Rome is only a fraction of its wealth. The real center, the real wealth of Christianity toils day by dreary day at ordinary jobs, lives ordinary lives, prays ordinary prayers. To me, that is the key. It's not the history or the artifacts; it's not the manuscripts and scrolls. It's how the story is lived.

So, yes to Christmas carols, yes to cards, and yes to whether Jesus really lived and walked among us. And, more important, yes to Jesus still alive in all those dreary places where water, food and dignity escape even the smallest babe. The Christ come into history is there, both needing and giving whatever is possible. If we want to believe the story, and want to live it out, that is where Jesus resides, both now and in history.

And if we are still so angry when we look around we cannot see the Christ, we have to understand and humbly accept we must first look in a mirror.

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