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What more can one say about Christmas? A meditation

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

With few exceptions over the course of more than 42 years, this column has offered an annual meditation on the meaning of Christmas. Each is accessible to anyone with the requisite interest -- and patience -- to download them from my Web site (www.richardmcbrrien.com).

Every year, however, it becomes increasingly difficult to come up with something new and fresh that links the approaching feast of the Nativity with the Christian life, or with some current situation in the Church and the world.

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A prime candidate for the most significant event of 2008 would be the election of the first African-American as President of the United States. But given the fact that some readers had serious political and moral reasons for not supporting Barack Obama, it would seem prudent not to attempt, even for meditative purposes, a connection between the President-elect's emphasis on the "audacity of hope" and one of the characteristic themes of the Christmas season.

That leaves us, however, with some of the theological and spiritual chords that this column has struck in past years.

As early as 1968 this column underscored the connection between Christmas and the Kingdom, or Reign, of God, both of which are about healing, reconciliation, bearing one another's burdens, compassion, justice, peace, and charity.

?The Spirit of Christmas,? the column insisted some 40 years ago, ?is the raw material of the Kingdom of God,? noting that ?few writers have captured the meaning of Christmas, and correspondingly the meaning of God?s Kingdom, better than Charles Dickens in his Christmas Carol (which was, it must be added, a document of social protest).?

?It is a rare human being who is not touched ... by the transformation of Scrooge from an insensitive, grasping, frightening old man, into a figure of warmth, compassion, and generosity?

In 1976 the column focused on loneliness as ?the dark underside of Christmas merrimentLoneliness and bitterness grow like weeds overnight in the Christmas patch because Christmas is, at root, about relationships, communities, homecomings?

?Christmas,? the column elaborated in 1989, ?is a time for family reunions, but not for the homeless. Christmas is a time for special feasting, but not for the hungry. Christmas is a time for lavish gift-giving, but not for the poor.?

In 1979 the column?s emphasis was on the identity and destiny of the new-born infant in his proverbial ?swaddling clothes.? The Jesus of Christmas ?was born into, and belonged to, the lower class and ... would later make it clear that wealth is an obstacle to entrance into the Kingdom of God (Matthew 19:16-30).?

It was the adult Jesus who insisted that our relationships with our neighbors in need will be the measure of judgment on the last day (Matthew 25:31-46).

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In 1981 readers were reminded that, while there was a *first* Christmas, there will also be a *last*. ?The world will come to an end, and Christians have some responsibility for how it comes to its end, for the direction it takes between now and then.?

Two years later the column pointed out that the exchange of gifts at Christmas gives us an opportunity to practice what Christ urged us all to do?but not at Christmas time alone. What we do for one another at Christmas should set the tone for the other 11 months of the year.

In 1991 the column noted that the ?real meaning of Christmas has more to do with the doors of the inn that were closed to Mary and Joseph and their unborn son than it does with artistically mediocre Christmas scenes and endlessly repeated Christmas music ...

?Christmas is about the opening of closed doors and of closed hearts.?

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, but more than one recent Pope has reminded us that peace is the work of justice. Unfortunately, when justice knocks at our parish, school, or diocesan doors, it too often receives about as warm a welcome as Mary and Joseph did at the inn at Bethlehem.

Five years ago this column ended where this week?s column began: wondering what more one can say about Christmas.

?The feast?s central theme, its Scripture readings, the sanctuary decorations, and the songs and carols will be exactly the same as they were last year, and the year before that, and many years before that.

?But each of us will be at a slightly different stage of our lives, viewing Christmas now in a slightly different light, experiencing its charms as well as its sharper edges in a slightly different way.

?Christmas itself does not change. It is we who change, and the world we inhabit.?

A blessed Christmas to all.

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