

Christmas 2

As a child, I never rated Christmas. I'd check my presents early, merely to satisfy myself that the weeks of manipulation had not been in vain. But my new fishing-rod/bicycle/air-pistol or whatever, would have to wait – the Christmas ritual didn't allow time to try out such things. Instead, we'd all pile into the car and head for my grandfather's flat, where he lived with Celia... known to all (behind her back) as his "fancy woman from Barnsley". (We weren't well-travelled, and the irony of using the words "fancy" and "Barnsley" in the same sentence, was lost on us.)

Unlike the rest of the family, I'd start getting queasy *before* lunch: the all-pervading stench of simmering sprouts would set me off, and I'd have to scrounge a glass of grand-dad's Dubonnet to settle my stomach. Alas, a single glass wouldn't do the trick, and by the time my parents eventually returned from the kitchen, I'd be somewhat mellow...or "smashed out of my head", as my father preferred to call it. It was hardly my fault: if grand-dad had only bothered to buy enough Dubonnet, I wouldn't have needed to switch to gin.

But inebriation would help me get through the afternoon. - the cracker-pulling, the paper-hat wearing... the Queen's message, and the Morecombe and Wise show. Grand-dad would always miss that: I can picture him now, sleeping in his chair. His mouth has fallen open, and yet he appears to have a hideous grin – as his top dentures have slipped down and are hanging over his bottom lip. He emits a gentle whistling sound, and occasionally a more substantial noise from lower down, as the sprouts work their magic. (I personally think that the accompanying flatulence is the least offensive aspect of these vegetables – it certainly beats the smell of them cooking.)

Eventually, we'd exchange pleasantries and leave. There would be a collective sigh of relief as we closed the doors of the car – echoed, I am sure, by a similar one as the door of the flat closed. Truth is (aside from one day per year) most of my family were rarely on speaking terms with each other. Our family Christmas was something of a hypocritical exercise - just a reluctant nod in the direction of civility, brought about by "the season of good-will to all men."

Of course, good-will was never meant to be seasonal. Being nice to people once a year, is a bit like giving up beating the wife for Lent: the benefit to others is strictly short-term, and only really serves to remind them of what they put up with the rest of the time. But if the Christmas good-will should flow all year round, so should the celebration of the "glad tidings". Not just annually, not even just weekly...but every day. Christ has accomplished far too much to be treated like some festive decoration – dragged out and displayed in December, then stuffed back in the box and forgotten. Even worse, God's greatest gift is sometimes accorded the status of an unwanted Christmas present – chucked (metaphorically) into the old wardrobe in the garage, along with the luminous socks and the eight-track version of Slade's Greatest Hits....never to see the light of day again.

Celebrating Christ on a daily basis, is really just the natural response to who he is, and to what he has done. Those who know him, have already accepted their invitations to 'the party that never stops'. I should think that will be something a little up-market from crackers and paper-hats. And *if* there are sprouts in heaven, I'm sure they'll taste really good....after all, Christ *does* perform miracles!

Have a good Christmas – Tom.