

And so this is Christmas...

Cathy Molloy

Cathy Molloy introduces Karl Rahner's 'Understanding Christmas', and invites us to find the silence in the midst of our Christmas activity to contemplate the meaning of what we are celebrating.

Amidst the hustle and bustle of Christmas many people find themselves drawing breath now and again and wondering what it is all about. On the one hand, there is the exhilaration of the 'season of goodwill', the decorations and seasonal music to brighten all our lives, the getting together with friends or colleagues or family, the special food and present-giving that lifts us right out of the ordinary humdrum existence of short days and long winter nights.

Where would we be without it? On the other hand, there are constant reminders that Christmas is not a joyous time for everyone. Loneliness and poverty, homelessness, isolation, hunger and sickness can be exacerbated at Christmastime and we are fairly bombarded with requests to include others at home and far away in our celebration of the great Christian feast. And so we should be.

But what is it all about? What is the meaning of Christmas? What does the Christian feast celebrate? In an essay entitled 'Understanding Christmas', German theologian and Jesuit priest, Karl Rahner, invites readers to an understanding of the meaning of this important Christian celebration. In celebrating the birth of Christ we celebrate the birth of the one in whose death and resurrection Christians have discovered hope and God's 'irrevocable promise of salvation'. The meaning of Christmas is that the emptiness of death is filled with the 'nameless incomprehensibility of God'. (Karl Rahner, 'Understanding Christmas,' in *Theological Investigations*, Volume XXIII, New York: The Cross Road Publishing Company, 1992 pp 140-148)



Picture by Andy Woo at flickr.com

The following extract, the conclusion of Rahner's essay, is offered as a meditative piece, a Christmas 'gift' to you who are busier than ever because it is Christmas, to you who are exhausted and wondering how it has come to this, to you who are delighted or disaffected, enchanted or alienated, by the excitement and the drama of Christmas.

Those who in the quiet of peaceful recollection, of docile resignation, in the silent Christmas of their own heart, let the press of things, of people, of desires fall back, which would otherwise obstruct their view of infinity, those who for a while at least extinguish the earthly lights that prevent them from seeing the stars in the sky, only those who, in a silent night of their heart, allow themselves to be called by the ineffable, wordless nearness of God speaking through its own silence, if we have the right ears for it, only they celebrate Christmas as it should be celebrated, if it is not to degenerate into a mere worldly holiday. We should feel as we do on a clear winter night, when we walk under the starry sky: far away the lights of human nearness and the security of home are still calling us. But above us stretches the sky, and we feel the silent night, which may at times impress us as uncanny and frightening, like the quiet nearness of the infinite mystery of our existence that is at once sheltering love and wide expanse.

The eternal future has entered our time. Its brightness is still dazzling, so that we believe it to be night. But it is a blessed night, a night that is already warmed and illuminated, a beautiful night, cosy and sheltering, because of the eternal day that it carries in its dark womb. It is silent night, holy night. But it is so for us

only if we allow the stillness of that night to enter our inner person, then in our heart too 'all is calm.' And that is not difficult. For such a loneliness and stillness are not heavy. Its only heaviness is that which belongs to all sublime things that are both simple and great.

Yes, we are lonely. There exists in our heart an inner land, where we are alone, to which nobody finds the way except God. This innermost unreachable chamber in our heart exists. The question is whether we, in a foolishly guilty way, avoid it, because nobody else and nothing of what is familiar to us on earth can enter into it with us. Let us enter there ever so quietly! Let us shut the door behind us! Let us listen to the ineffable melody that fills the silence of that night. Here the silent and lonely soul sings for the God of her heart her finest and most personal song. And she may be sure that God hears it. For this song no longer has to seek the beloved God beyond the stars in that inaccessible light where he dwells and where no one can see him. Because it is

Christmas, because the Word was made flesh, God is near, and the faintest word in the quiet chamber of our heart, the word of love, reaches his ear and his heart.

We must be quiet and not fear the night, else we will hear nothing. For the ultimate message is uttered only in the night's stillness ever since, through the gracious arrival of the Word into the night of our life, Christmas' silent night, holy night came down among us.

Cathy Molloy is the Social Theology Officer at the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, Dublin.

Adapted from an article originally published in Working Notes, the journal of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice.