Christmas Day 2025

Isaiah 52.7-10
Hebrews 1.1-12
John 1.1-14

They will perish, but you remain;
they will wear out like clothing;
like a cloak you will roll them up,
and like clothing they will be changed.
But you are the same,
and your years will never end.

In the run up to Christmas every year, the Rectory is greened and garlanded; the tree comes up as close to Advent Sunday as we can manage and remains until Candlemas. One of the benefits of a cold Rectory is that Christmas trees last forever in there. The cards you kindly send us are hung up like bunting as soon as they arrive. This is all my wife's doing, which she does to a perpetual soundtrack of Advent and Christmas music, of which she was remarkably wide taste. It really is the Lewis side of the Lewis-Jong family that brings the Christmas Spirit to the house—the Jong side is, instead, full of the *bahhumbug* common to clerics during busy liturgical seasons. For me, Christmas

really does begins today, which is of course liturgically appropriate.

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It is more than appropriate to speak of Christmas traditions and of the phrase “Bah! Humbug!” in the same breath. We owe much to Charles Dickens this time of year, whose A *Christmas Carol*—read aloud annually at the Rectory too—may be credited with a sort of re-invention of the English Christmas.

Indeed, its narrative arc—the character development of Ebenezer Scrooge—of dour miserliness transformed into joyous generosity is itself a parable of the historical change from Oliver Cromwell’s ban on Christmas in 1644 to its gradual revival, which picked up pace in Victoria’s reign. Perhaps it is fairer to say that much is owed to Victoria, and to her Prince Consort Albert, who—being a foreigner from the Continent—knew nothing of and had little time for Puritan austerity. Victoria, whose mother was German, was familiar with Christmas trees, but Albert *loved* them: and from the mid-19th century onwards, so did the rest of Britain.

Certainly, the exchange of Christmas cards was popularised by Victoria and Albert, whose friend Sir

Henry Cole invented them in 1843 (the same year A *Christmas Carol* was published), having made 1,000 of them, mainly bought by aristocrats and other wealthy families. By 1880, 11 million were printed. Albert is also said to have popularised gingerbread. And the displacement of goose (still the staple in Dickens) by turkey towards the end of the 19th century may also have begun at the royal dining table.

Now, it sounds like the royal household really revived Christmas, having brought in Christmas cheer from Germany (of all places) to our shores. And others should be credited too. In 1833, William Sandys published *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern*, which collected together songs that might otherwise have bene forgotten. This includes the *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentleman* that we find at the beginning of Dickens's novella. In 1843, Eliza Acton includes a recipe that, for the first time in print, is called "Christmas pudding", though the association between the pudding and Christmas had already begun in the 1830s.

But Dickens did more than simply report on these new habits, nor did he just capture the *zeitgeist*: rather, his little story, which drew all these distinct innovations together into a compelling narrative, also inspired millions of normal, non-royal, Brits to sing and feast and take time off and gather together as

families and focus on their children and, crucially, also on the poor and needy. Dickens himself intended for *A Christmas Carol* to inspire social change, not simply by shaping the English aesthetic of Christmas, but also our moral and socioeconomic imaginations. Before Dickens, in Industrial Britain, Christmas holidays were very rare indeed: until he persuaded capitalists that if they did not give their employees time off, they would be haunted by ghosts. The story's emphasis on the plight of poor children in particular—not just Tiny Tim, but also the two "meagre, ragged" children appearing with the Ghost of Christmas Present, named Ignorance and Want—is no small reason that Christmas is now widely seen as a time to contribute to children's charities, as we do in this Benefice, nearly two centuries later.

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What Dickens *didn't* do is to bring religion back into Christmas. That sort of thing would have to wait for the end of the 19th century, when churches—and especially Cathedrals—decided to put on carol services that proved very popular: the first Lessons and Carols service was held at Truro Cathedral in 1880. King's College Cambridge then made it famous in 1919, not

least with that sublime lone treble intoning the first line of *Once in Royal David's City*. John Ruskin even remarked—disapprovingly, I should add—that Dickens had taken religion *out of* Christmas: ten days after Dickens's death, Ruskin wrote that "His Christmas meant mistletoe and pudding—neither resurrection from the dead, nor rising of new stars, nor teaching of wise men, nor shepherds." He felt that the literary loss was infinite, but the ideological one perhaps less so.

My assessment is a little more generous than Ruskin's. To be sure, Dickens's revival of Christmas is *incomplete*, but it certainly moves in the right direction in its exuberant and empathetic *humanism*. Christmas—Christianly-conceived—is a humanistic celebration: a celebration of humanity, which must therefore also always be a call towards humanity, towards humaneness, the right treatment of one another on the basis of the right view of one another.

People have tried to provide a basis of human rights on all sorts of grounds, most of them flimsy, upon closer inspection. At the end of the day, secular visions of human rights—including the UN's Universal Declaration—rest on consensus: and therefore, fall apart if and when there is disagreement. Or they are justified on practical grounds: but this means that we might do without the conviction of a person's inherent

worth and value if such a conviction is no longer useful, or becomes too inconvenient to us, and we decide that we can no longer afford to hold them.

For Christians and Jews, however, the value and worth of every single human being is grounded in our being created by God who grants upon us our dignity. And Christians in particular take things one step—one infinitely large step—farther in our insistence, whose profundity is obscured by its familiarity, [our insistence] that, once upon a time, in the Palestinian backwater of the Roman Empire, God saw it fit to be born a human being.

This claim is the central assertion of the Christian faith. Jews and Muslims understood this from the beginning, and have always recognised how outrageous it is. We Christians now forget its audacity at our peril. The adoption of the almighty and ineffable creator of all things of so meagre and ragged a substance as human flesh and blood confers upon us absolute and infinite significance. Christianity is unabashedly anthropocentric: it is the most uncompromising humanism, daring to blur the boundaries between the human and the divine, if not erase them altogether in the person of Jesus Christ.

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There has, this year, been talk of putting Christ back into Christmas, and also some predictable backlash. It is too complex a situation to divide the conversation into sides, but there are at least two parties who are missing something essential in all this.

Those who resist the religious—the *theological*—aspects of Christmas run the risk of building an ethics of human dignity on nothing more than consensus or convenience, neither of which can bear the weight of so important a thing. Secularism is perfectly adequate when we all happen to agree on what is good and evil; but we don't any more, and so we are left only with what is affordable.

Those who say on one placard that they want to put Christ back in Christmas but on another that immigrants, and especially ethnic and religious minorities, are unwelcome here have, arguably, missed something even more obvious: that the humanism of the Incarnation knows no such divisions, no distinctions of religion, race, and nation—being a cosmic event. And so, to put Christ back at the heart of Christmas must be to put all people there, whom indeed Christ himself has brought to the bosom of the Father.