

"Christmas 2010"

Essay in Theology Rev. Richard McBrien

I had a professor in the seminary who used to point out that the liturgical year moves not in a circular fashion, but in an upward spiral. Even though we celebrate the same major feasts each year, our observance of them is never exactly the same as it was the year before, because we have changed since then and so, too, has the world around us. This is surely the case with Christmas.

The message and meaning of Christmas have been the same since the time of Christ himself. The customs and carols are of more recent origin, but long-standing enough that they seem bathed in the aura of eternity.

Those of us already in mid-life or older may still recall some of the smallest details of Christmases long past -- some exceedingly joyful, others sad and perhaps even tragic. Charles Dickens's classic, *A Christmas Carol*, captured the temporal dimensions of the feast better than any other.

We experienced our earliest Christmases as innocent, vulnerable children, completely dependent on our parents for love, sustenance, and security, and then as gradually maturing, but often uncertain and conflicted, teenagers tentatively testing our capacity for independence.

We continued to move through the subsequent stages of life: as young adults, newly marrieds with children of our own, aging adults with grandchildren, widows and widowers, singles of all ages, living alone or with others.

Christmas always loomed large -- for good and sometimes for ill -- toward the end of each one of those years, in each one of those stages of life. And so it shall be again this year. The difference is that we are likely to be at a slightly higher point on liturgy's spiral -- and life's.

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 which we inhabit.

The unchangeable message of Christmas is that Jesus of Nazareth, the one born in Bethlehem some two millennia ago, uniquely personifies the reality of God and mediates God's redemptive power on our behalf. Which is to say, in other terms, that the words and example of Jesus Christ are the eternal standard by which every human life and human history itself are to be measured.

This is in accordance with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World that Christ is "the key, the center and the purpose of the whole of human history" (n. 10). ☐☐The feast of Christmas proclaims, year in and year out, that Jesus Christ is the answer. But answers have meaning only in relation to questions.

Vatican II listed "the most fundamental of all questions" for which Christ provides "the key": "What is humanity? What is the meaning of suffering, evil, death...? What is the purpose of [human] achievements, purchased at so high a price? What can people contribute to society? What can they expect from it? What happens after this earthly life is ended?" Such questions as these are more practical than theoretical because they apply to life as it is, not as we might imagine it to be. Jesus did not come to provide us with a secret code by which to decipher the mysteries of reality. He came rather to illuminate what is already visible, tangible, and familiar within our ordinary human experience.

Indeed, Jesus is much like a good teacher who guides us in the reading of a classic text, calling attention to its most important passages, while turning us away from what is trivial and insignificant. We learn to read the book now with wholly different eyes and to reflect on it in a wholly different spirit.

"You have heard that it was said... but I say to you..." (Matthew 5:21-48).

Some of the Fathers of the Church compared Jesus to a singer with a strong voice and a perfect pitch who joins a discordant choir and completely transforms it. It is not that Jesus gave us a different set of songs to sing, but helped us instead to perform our standard repertoire in an entirely new and more beautiful way.

Christmas is a time for remembering that, and for moving upward with him on the spiral of liturgy and life.