CHRISTMAS ISN'T THAT IMPORTANT

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How we present the birth of Jesus is important. It is not simply a prelude to a death (though it is that), but it is first of all the prelude to a life which challenges the basic assumptions of contemporary society.
Category: Observations

I realise that the title of this blog post isÂ *slightly* controversial, but let me pose one simple question; if Christmas really is that important, how come two of the four Gospels don't mention it at all?

Let me push this slightly further; the Gospels that do mention Christmas, Matthew and Luke each consecrate less than two chapters to the story. Let's be generous and call that four full chapters across the Gospels. In terms of chapters, this is 4.5% of the Gospel narrative.

Now, my problem is not so much that we spend a disproportionate amount of time talking about the birth of Jesus (though, I'd suggest we do), it is that we (at least those of us of an evangelical persuasion) don't spend enough time talking about the life and teaching of Jesus. We rush from Christmas to Easter, from the manger to the cross, with barely a thought for the intervening thirty or so years. We have a tendency to present Jesus as someone who was born and died, without giving a lot of thought to the fact that he also lived.

OK, let me backtrack a little. I do think that Christmas is important; it is important because of what it symbolises and what it leads into. It shows us that God is intimately interested in life on this planet; he lived here and experienced the highs and the lows of human existence. He also taught us to pray that God's kingdom would come onÂ *earth* as well as in heaven.

This is important.

We live in a society which tries to drive a wedge between the physical and spiritual, between the sacred and the secular. It tells us that religion belongs in the spiritual/sacred world and is simply a matter of opinion and should be kept private and away from public life. We unwittingly play into this narrative when we focus on the birth and death of Jesus but not on his life. We place him in the spiritual world allowing society to conveniently sideline him and his teachings.

However, the gritty Jesus of the Gospels, who walked the roads of Palestine and got hungry, thirsty and tired, cannot be so easily pushed aside by our society. His message of the Kingdom is decidedly uncomfortable and challenges social, economic and political orthodoxies.

In a post-Englightenment world which only places value on that which can be measured and verified, the life of Jesus (which is well attested in contemporary documents) stands as a challenge to society. It shows that there is a reality behind our message. It also shows that Christianity is not just about airy-fairy, spiritual, pie-in-the-sky-when-we-die stuff. Jesus does not present life on earth as being little more than a waiting room for heaven, he gives it value and importance, he announces the reign of God on our little planet. How we live now matters and to misquote the carol, "he is our life's pattern".

As I said yesterday, I think Christmas is a wonderful opportunity for evangelism. However, I think that how we present the birth of Jesus is important. It is not simply a prelude to a death (though it is that), but it is first of all the prelude to a life which challenges the basic assumptions of contemporary society. Christians and non-Christians alike need to grasp this.