

Sermon on Christmas Day 2013 by Stephen Mitchell

*“While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All watching ITV,
The angel of the Lord came down
And switched to BBC.”*

So chaps, there you are at home, feet up on the sofa, beer in hand, cat on lap, watching something really interesting on your favourite oh-so obscure TV channel (in my case usually some in-depth analysis of the Eastern Front or the Fall of Berlin) when in comes the wife, fresh from her labours; or a good gossip at the hairdressers; or possibly laden with shopping.

‘Hullo, best beloved,’ is your heartfelt greeting as her shining face appears in the doorway.

Are you greeted in turn as the love of her life you are supposed to be?

Does she immediately enquire as to the quality of your day?

Does she even indicate a desire for a cup of tea?

Of course she doesn’t. She simply says:

‘Do we have to have that on now?’

So you grudgingly hand over the remote and slope off to satisfy her unspoken, but nonetheless real, desire for the aforesaid tea for, good husband that you are, you know what she really wants, and by the time you return the intricacies of Marshall Zhukov’s manoeuvrings have disappeared back into the mists of history and the Crafting Shopping Channel is on and you are obliged to watch one long extended sales pitch thinly disguised as a lesson in how to make bigger and better Hanukah and Diwali cards and renamed by me the ‘Scissoring and Sticking Show’.

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And switched to BBC.’*

Christmas runs the risk of becoming an occasion just for us to indulge yet further in those things that interest us, chiefly having a good time, and as good a time as possible.

What it should be about is engaging with what interests God.

So what are those things? Why, as St Anselm asked back in the Middle Ages, did God become man in the first place?

This whole Christmas thing is about our salvation. And the angel of the Lord is asking all of us to ‘switch over’ to thinking about that above all else.

That salvation wasn't achieved by what happened at Christmas, for that was only the start. For our salvation to be real we need the other end of the story, the whole Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter bit. And there are plenty of hints in the Christmas story about that;

Herod massacres all those little boys;

Joseph flees to Egypt with Mary and their son;

The wise men bring myrrh;

And Mary is told a sword of suffering will pierce her mother's heart.

The Christmas tale as told by the channel God watches is the whole gospel story, beginning and ending, the tough bits as well as all the soft fluffy stuff. The only 'little donkey' in his version, for example, is the one which carries Jesus into Jerusalem to meet his death.

All too often the version of the story which excites us, by contrast, is the one found on the 'romantic channel', a tale of the young mum and her new baby, the kindly innkeeper who finds room for her with his cuddly animals and visiting shepherds doubtless laden with woolly lambs, and all of it portrayed by lots of children in their teatowells.

So, am I advocating we all alter our satellite packages to include the Scrooge Channel? Not a bit of it, merely that when we celebrate Christmas we bear in mind the whole story.

Christmas, you see, is just for openers. Christmas is like an engagement party the sole purpose of which is to look forward to something even greater and that of course is Easter and all that goes with it to make it, and not Christmas, whatever the carol might say the 'holy tide which all other doth deface'.

If we can begin to think of Christmas in this fashion then, and only then, however splendid your yuletide festivities might be, do we begin to do it justice.

So, maybe this Christmas we ought, each of us to consider handing over that remote, as it were, and allowing God to show us what in all this is of interest to him.