

25 December 2022
Christmas Day

Elijah 52:7-10
Hebrews 1:1-4
John 1:1-14

In a recent letter to the editor of the Dominion Post, Jen McArthur makes a case for shifting the celebration of Christmas to *June 25th*. She writes¹

I have lived here all my life but something is becoming more obvious and urgent to me the older I get. Christmas is no good in summer.

Christmas is a festival with a magical quality; that comes from it being cold and dark outside. In winter, we need colourful lights on houses to give us cheer, presents to give us a lift, connection with family to make us feel that we aren't alone in the cold. Doing these things for ourselves in winter time is a really good idea. ...

Let's move Christmas to June 25. ... We can create the calendar that will actually serve us, rather than deplete our energy, steal the magic from the world and, frankly, make us look like idiots stuck in a colonialist time warp.

Inevitably Jen's letter has sparked responses, making a spirited defence of the December celebration.² Various reasons are put forward in support of a December observance, including a couple that appear to take 25 December as the actual birth date of Jesus, thus rendering the celebration immovable.

However, among the writers of letters in response, the Reverend Jenny Dawson has it right when noting that "there is no authoritative tradition as to the day or month of Christ's birth but the December date has been kept since 336 CE across the world."

I have no doubt that it won't be long before someone pens a letter or article noting that the selection of December 25th for the celebration, and the development of some of the traditions associated with it, was likely due to the Christianizing of the *dies solis invicti nati* (the "day of the birth of the unconquered sun"), a popular holiday in the Roman Empire that celebrated the winter solstice as a symbol of the

¹ In Letters, *The Dominion Post*, December 19, 2022, p.13.

² In Letters, *The Dominion Post*, December 19, 2022, p.24.

resurgence of the sun, the casting away of winter and the heralding of the rebirth of spring and summer.

I get a little irritated with these kinds of articles, employed to try to discredit the Christian faith. I am equally irritated by a kind of fundamentalist Christianity that asserts that if the celebration on that date and in that particular form is not specifically mandated in Scripture then it should be disallowed. For me such remarks begs the question “So what?”. The *fact* is that the Bible records the birth (along with the death and resurrection) of Jesus; these events are worthy of our respect and celebration; and we need not get too fixated with their exact dating. And if the appropriation of some of the traditions associated with the pagan festivals help us to celebrate these real Christian events, then, as long as we’re clear about what we’re celebrating and why, then what is the matter?

The Bible records the birth of Jesus.

But John’s Gospel does not.³ From all appearances, it would seem that John knows next to nothing about angels or shepherds, stars or Magi. He doesn’t even appear to know the name of Jesus’ mother!

Perhaps John wanted to ensure that we didn’t get distracted by the sweetness and magic of the scene: no angels, swaddling clothes, or sheep enter John’s scene to deflect attention from the essential point of all that occurred.⁴

But even if we might understand something of John’s reason for writing as he did, why do we persist with this particular reading as an option for Christmas Day? Wouldn’t we be better off with Luke and Matthew, who at least give us something of the narrative, the unfolding of the events?

Why do we persist with John 1?

Because it captures the heart, meaning, and benefits of the Christmas story in a nutshell.

³ The following draws heavily on David Lose, “Commentary on John 1:1-14”, quoting freely, at times with adaptation and additions.

⁴ Judith Jones, “Commentary on John 1:1-14”

And John begins with something that would have made for an arresting headline: “In the beginning”. He gets his readers’ attention by repeating the opening line of Scripture itself. But this is not just for effect, because, like the author of Genesis, John too is talking about creation – God’s *new creation* in Christ, the Word of God made flesh.

To get at the significance of John’s poetic witness to the Word, we might be well served by employing some of the questions of journalism, sometimes known as the “five W’s”.

The first question is *What?* In other words, what’s happening? Jesus, according to John, has been a part of creation from the very beginning. What occurs now is that God’s eternal Word — God’s Reason, Order, and very Being — is coming to earth to take on human flesh. This is the not first time God has “gotten involved” in human history, of course. God has been at work in the world through covenant, law, judges, kings, and prophets: our reading from Hebrews talks of these kinds of things – “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” John tells us God has been at work in the world but is now getting more personally involved, as the very Word of God takes on human flesh and dwells — literally, “tabernacles” or “tents” — with us in our own human form.

What’s happening? God is making himself present among humankind as a human being.

The next question is *Why?* Why is God making himself present among humankind as a human being? Because the world that has fallen into darkness needs light! In a small way, Jen McArthur reflects this need: “Christmas is a festival with a magical quality; that comes from it being cold and dark outside. In winter, we need colourful lights on houses to give us cheer, presents to give us a lift.” Against the cold and dark of the winter of a world that has fallen away from the divine intention, God comes prepared to struggle, light against darkness, day against night. That struggle is captured in John’s words in this way: “The light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

And as for presents to give us a lift – God makes the ultimate present of himself to give us, not merely a lift, but *life*. As John will go on to say in his most famous verse: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” *That’s* the big Why.

Next is *Who*? Or, better to ask, who is affected by this? All of us are affected, as new creation means new possibility for everyone! Even though many, including many who were close to him, did not recognize in Jesus what God was accomplishing, all those who do recognize and receive him are invited to become God’s own children. We need identity and connection to be fully human. Again, this need is pointed to in Jen’s letter as she writes: “we need ... connection with family to make us feel that we aren’t alone in the cold.” In response to this big need, God invites us to become God’s own children.

Notice the freedom John fills this invitation with: We are children born not of blood (i.e. we will not be subject to the frailties of human flesh forever), nor of the will of the flesh (i.e. we are more than our desires), nor of the will of humans (i.e. we will not always be subject to whim and will of others). Rather, we are children of God, restored to God’s intention in creation.

Jen McArthur values humanity’s ability to do things “for ourselves”, and wishes for a calendar that would “serve us”. But, actually, that kind of thing won’t get us there. God has an intention for us and, given our propensity to wander off on our own way, we can’t on our own find our way back. We need God to act for us, and on our behalf: and this is what he did in the person of Jesus.

Finally we come back to the kind of question that lies behind Jen McArthur’s letter: *Where and when*? For John all this is not just about something located in a manger in Bethlehem that occurred long ago: it is about here, today, now! Yes, the specific event which gives John reason to write took place in a particular location at a particular time.

Jen writes of being made to “look like idiots stuck in a colonialist time warp.” I realise she is talking about some of the traditions we have imported with us from other places, times, and seasons with which to celebrate the event, but her words signpost the fact that to be human is to be bound to time and place. And the fact is, for God to take on human flesh of necessity meant entering a particular time and place: as it

happens it was Palestine some time around 4BC. But what John makes abundantly clear this very particular event has significance that is cosmic and eternal.

Perhaps this is why John gives such scant attention to the details of Jesus' birth. He is, ultimately, more interested in our birth, our new birth as children of God. You could almost say that according to John, Christmas is not really about Jesus' birthday at all; rather, it is about ours. Christmas is the day we can celebrate *our* birth as children of God, the keeping of all God's promises, and the beginning of the restoration of all creation.

John may not give us much about the details of the Christmas story, but he does know about the heart and soul of what is called "the Incarnation" – God, in his Son, taking on human flesh. The heart and soul of the incarnation is that because Jesus, the very embodiment of God's grace⁵ takes on human flesh, we are granted the chance to know the unknowable God⁶ and recognize ourselves as those children beloved of God. This is the gift of Christmas, a new identity, a new opportunity, a new humanity, all through God in Christ. This is the gift of Christmas, and it deserves our full attention on this day and, indeed, throughout the year – yes, even in June!

Sources:

- David Lose, "Commentary on John 1:1-14", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/christmas-day-nativity-of-our-lord/commentary-on-john-11-14-2>
- Judith Jones, "Commentary on John 1:1-14", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/christmas-day-nativity-of-our-lord-iii/commentary-on-john-11-14-6>

⁵ John 1:16

⁶ John 1:18