

“Emmanuel” by Frederick Buechner

Christmas is not just Mr. Pickwick dancing a reel with the old lady at Dingley Dell or Scrooge waking up the next morning a changed man. It is not just the spirit of giving abroad in the land with a white beard and reindeer. It is not just the most famous birthday of them all and not just the annual reaffirmation of Peace on Earth that it is often reduced to so that people of many faiths or no faith can exchange Christmas cards without a qualm.

On the contrary, if you do not hear in the message of Christmas something that must strike some as blasphemy and others as sheer fantasy, the chances are you have not heard the message for what it is. Emmanuel is the message in a nutshell. Emmanuel, which is Hebrew for "God with us." That's where the problem lies.

The claim that Christianity makes for Christmas is that at a particular time and place "the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity" came to be with us himself. When Quirinius was governor of Syria, in a town called Bethlehem, a child was born who, beyond the power of anyone to account for, was the high and lofty One made low and helpless. The One whom none can look upon and live is delivered in a stable under the soft, indifferent gaze of cattle. The Father of all mercies puts himself at our mercy. Year after year the ancient tale of what happened is told raw, preposterous, holy and year after year the world in some measure stops to listen.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. A dream as old as time. If it is true, it is the chief of all truths. If it is not true, it is of all truths the one that people would most have be true if they could make it so.

Maybe it is that longing to have it be true that is at the bottom even of the whole vast Christmas industry the tons of cards and presents and fancy food, the plastic figures kneeling on the floodlit lawns of poorly attended churches. The world speaks of holy things in the only language it knows, which is a worldly language.

Emmanuel. We all must decide for ourselves whether it is true. Certainly the grounds on which to dismiss it are not hard to find. Christmas is commercialism. It is a pain in the neck. It is sentimentality.

It is wishful thinking. The shepherds. The star. The three wise men. Make believe.

Yet it is never as easy to get rid of as all this makes it sound. To dismiss Christmas is for most of us to dismiss part of ourselves. It is to dismiss one of the most fragile yet enduring visions of our own childhood and of the child that continues to exist in all of us. The sense of mystery and wonderment. The sense that on this one day each year two plus two adds up not to four but to a million.

What keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive year after year in a world notorious for dashing all hopes is the haunting dream that the child who was born that day may yet be born again even in us. Emmanuel. Emmanuel.

First Coming, by Madeleine L'Engle

*He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.
He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.
He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.
He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice! (from A Cry Like a Bell)*