

Christmas is Coming!



Nativity with Midwife, 1913

Eric Gill
1882-1940

As it does every year. It comes round with ever-increasing speed, as one gets older, and as soon as the summer holidays are over, Christmas seems to be upon us almost immediately!

The question is, how can we make this year's Christmas experience better, more satisfying, deeper, and avoid the trivial commercial exploitation of what is, after all, a religious festival for Christian people. How difficult it is not to be sucked into the commercial Christmas! The more you get sucked in, the less time you have for the real thing, and the less you taste the satisfying festival that Christmas really is.

The reasons for Christmas being a satisfying festival concern both the original story as we read it in the Gospels and the way in which our own lives are reflected in it. It is, after all, a human story with that special quality of expectation which any new born child will create. With hindsight, and that is how all the Christmas stories were written, we may reflect and ponder how this young life was to develop and then end on a cross outside the Jerusalem city walls.

This year, Egypt has been in the news rather a lot, as part of the Arab-spring. The people forced out their president, who was very unpopular and tried to create a new democracy for themselves. Probably for the first time if you don't count the 2005 presidential elections in which Mubarak polled almost 85% in what must have been a rigged election.

One of the less celebrated aspects of the Christmas story is the flight of the Holy family to Egypt. On the next page are four illustrations of this theme.



James Tissot 1836-1902



Gustave Doré 1832-1883



Giotto 1266-1337



Benedetto Briosco and Tommaso Cazzaniga 1484

Despite six centuries separating the artists, the theme is remarkably similar. Tissot and Giotto have three figures in the background, with trees in the Giotto and people on camels in Tissot who also shows a camel skeleton, a memento mori for Jesus and for all of us. These represent the forthcoming passion of Jesus and this flight into Egypt is a foreshadowing of his suffering. Becoming a refugee is a real cause of suffering in our world today. To be forced to leave your home out of fear of death or reprisals is a deeply disturbing thing and in this respect, we may celebrate that Jesus was a refugee and shared the pain of refugees in every generation. He was a victim of a tyrant and as we would say today, his human rights were abused pretty badly.

Three of the paintings show Joseph leading the donkey. It is a kind of echo of the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, only this time, the baby is sitting on Mary's knee. In the Dore picture, Joseph takes a last look back towards home, perhaps longing for it and loathing the journey he is now undertaking. In the Briosco and Cazzaniga work, Joseph seems to be carrying one of his tools, a reminder that these were not rich people on a holiday, but poor people and Joseph still has to earn a living in exile as he had to at home in Nazareth. Giotto shows a guardian angel watching over the Holy Family, ensuring their safety and reassuring the observer that all will be well and that salvation, which is the cause of incarnation, will be achieved in good time.

One of the magic things about the Christmas story is how the deeply human aspect is decorated with angels and miracles and things which these days, many people might feel embraced about. Don't be worried. Allow the ancient world to be a part of the story and don't feel put off. The heart of Christmas is love, which we see in so many aspects. It is about the love which brings a baby to birth in difficult circumstances, the love with which a man protects a woman and the child, the love which ensures the safety of the child under threat of death, and not for the last time, the love which endures suffering, the love which endures for a lifetime albeit a short one.

At Christmas we need to focus on the story closely and allow the ancient message to fill our ears and find in it both warm familiarity and a freshness as we go deeper and deeper into the heart of Christmas. Enjoy your Christmas at Church, take some of it home with you in the form of a Christmas crib or picture, sing a carol at home, exchange gifts with meaning rather than just a price tag. Entertain and enjoy company and make the most of any time off work by spending it with those you love and doing something really splendid together. Christmas is when we do the things which create the lasting memories, for children and adults alike.

The Flight to Egypt
Jean-Francois Millet
1814-1875



Two children's poems on the Egyptian part of the Christmas story, by Richard Lawson Gales 1862-1927

COCKADOODLEDOO!
Our Lady's lost her shoe,
St. Joseph's lost his lantern,
What will they do?
The Child will be both Shoes and Staff
And a Lantern too.
In the dark night He'll be their Light.
And their Guide so true
Cockadoodledoo!

They that slept for sorrow
Wake on a glad morrow,
Their goal won,
Their travel done,
Their trouble thro'--
How cunning is His little laugh
His eyes how blue!
Cockadoodledoo!
The sun is high in Egypt's sky,
Cockadoodledoo!

BABES in the wood
Babes in the tower,
Babes killed at Childermas
In an evil hour,
Babe safe in Egypt
From the tyrant's power,

Wicked uncles, wicked kings,
Robbers counting chains and rings,
Wicked kings who killed for greed,
A good thief who stole for need,
Herod gone and Crookback sped,
The old villainous uncle dead,
When the Babe is crowned a King
That good thief will find his meed
In a green place where robins sing,
Where the holy babes and meek
In the wood play hide-and-peek.