

Of Christmas and Dynamite

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Given all the toil and trouble of the human race in a fallen world, it's only right that we look to some peace on earth and goodwill to men in this season. There's certainly no excess of brotherhood and fellow feeling during the rest of the year. And let's stipulate: It's not just our happening to be alive at this moment that makes us believe that – *anno Domini* 2024 and perhaps even more 2025 – things look particularly troubled: Wars and rumors of wars, widespread unrest at home, deep division in the Church. You don't need to look far for why, to slightly adapt a famous modern philosopher, **only the coming of God can save us now.**

Or at least that's the lesson that bad times should teach us.

But there's another lesson about His Coming. As Bishop James Edward Walsh, one of the first Maryknoll missionaries in China, said after years of experience, even before spending nearly two decades in captivity: **“Christianity is not a private way of salvation and a guide to a pious life; it is a way of world salvation and a philosophy of total life. This makes it a sort of dynamite. So when you send missionaries out to preach it, it is well to get ready for some explosions.”**

Among the many paradoxes of God becoming man, we have to somehow take into account – not “understand” as we normally think of understanding – how the Prince of Peace can also be the One who brings a sword: the ultimate disrupter. Is true peace, for us, unsettling? **Indeed, if we believe that the Fall turned the world upside down, it follows that the coming of the**

Redeemer has to turn things right-side up again – with no small degree of disturbance.

And whatever peace that thought may bring us, the experience is still going to be dizzying. **Christianity is not a soft pillow on which to lay your head, but something, sometimes, immediately overwhelming, at other times a slow but relentless overturning of – let's not soften the truth – everything.** The world is what it's always been and, suddenly, at the same time, entirely different.

It's good to remember that the explosions aren't just "out there," somewhere else, in strange mission lands. They happen – and very much ought to happen – here, now, everywhere as well. That's the story of the Gospels. And even of the more remote past. A baby is born in an obscure town:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days.

That was prophesied by Micah (5:2). Remember him? No? St. Matthew did (2:6), even though those words by one of the most minor of the minor prophets were set down, oh, maybe 750 years before they came true. And referred to truths immeasurably old.

By normal human reckoning, that shouldn't happen – and certainly shouldn't have remade the mighty Roman Empire and changed the course of human history. It's almost not fair of God. Why go to all the trouble of building up a whole civilization only to have it taken over and transformed by a few poor fishermen, tax collectors, a doctor or lawyer or two, some provincial

notables? Even the destruction of Jerusalem a few decades later couldn't stop the thing.

In one way, it was the work of madmen. People willing to die for a story about a child who grew up to be a charismatic preacher, did a few "miracles" (or so they say), was brutally executed, and supposedly "rose" from the dead. Which everyone knows cannot happen.

In another way, it drove his followers to gibberish, or multiple languages that various peoples somehow understood, or whatever that was all about. That Paul of Tarsus guy, who had studied a bit too much for his own good, gets religion and goes off his head, starts writing things that even that Peter guy says are hard to understand. And yet he, too, turns thing upside down wherever he goes. Some people, understandably, stone him or beat him. Chase him out of town. Others can't make sense of him, but know there's something alive like nothing else in that torrent of words anyway.

And of course, since everything perverse and decadent winds up in Rome, those two do as well. **Killing them doesn't stop it either. It takes a while, but instead, they and their whole crew stop Rome, or at least the old Rome. The barbarians move in. They wind up Christian? The provinces too. Lots of chaos ensues, but a whole series of explosions as well from England to India. And when new worlds are discovered, the disruption spreads there as well.**

And so here we are. Two thousand years is not a long time compared to the 14 billion years of the universe. But 2000 years is a long time for beings who rarely even reach 100. It's hard to say, after so many improbable explosions, whether the dynamite is near the end (which He said would come) or only just beginning. **One thing we can say is that it's like nothing else. No child who has come among us has had anything like the impact on the whole earth.** The predictions of His coming

seemed – and seem – like the ravings of people who have sat long under the desert sun. The claims at his birth and in the years after were, to the best minds of the day, an absurdity. And the powerful only knew He was dangerous enough that **He had to be stamped out.**

But He wasn't and can't be. It makes no sense. A child is born. He seems to live and die like all the rest. But He lives. People still find comfort and joy in Him, and are inspired, beyond all human calculation, to stake their very lives on Him. Just think of that.

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