

*Christmas Unplugged*

A few years ago there was a series of records released whose titles included the word 'Unplugged'. These were recordings in which rock musicians performed their songs using only acoustic instruments - so there was Eric Clapton Unplugged, Bob Dylan unplugged, Neil Young Unplugged and various others. They made for fascinating listening, as well-known songs were transformed by being stripped of their instrumentation, pared down to their basics, without all the noise and bombast of electric guitars and keyboards. In many cases it was like listening to new songs.

Well, that series of records came to my mind this year, thinking about Christmas in this time of Covid. So much that we associate with Christmas has been stripped away. Christmas parties, social gatherings, family reunions, crowds, stores packed with shoppers, carol singers – they've all gone. There's a little bar just along the road from where I live which at Christmas time normally goes crazy with decorations: they close for a couple of days while they deck the inside with foliage and hangings and baubles and lights and when you're inside it's like being on the middle of a Christmas tree. Well, this year it is shut, of course, and there are just some coloured lights in the window. This year it is a case of Christmas pared down, Christmas without all the razzmatazz: we might even call it 'Christmas Unplugged'.

And actually there is something quite appropriate about that, because it would not be too far off the mark to call Christmas 'God Unplugged'. After all, we are accustomed to thinking of God in power and majesty and might. This is the God who rides the storm, the God of smoke and earthquake and fire who Moses met up on Mountain called Sinai, the God whose back was all that Moses was permitted to see such was the radiance of his glory. This is the God who is pictured on his throne surrounded by the heavenly host crying, 'holy, holy, holy...', the one before whom the angels veil their faces. This is, you might say, a heavy metal God, or maybe a Carmina Burana God, full of sound and fury and clashing cymbals, the volume turned up full.

But then, at Christmas, there comes the extraordinary mystery of what we call the Incarnation, of God stripped down to our size, God coming to us not in noise and clamour but in the silent night, as the carol puts it. This is the God revealed in Jesus who, as Paul writes, probably quoting an ancient Christian hymn:

though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited  
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

Here is Jesus emptied, stripped down, Jesus with his glory laid aside: Jesus the Word made flesh and the Word spoken not with a shout or through a microphone, but softly: God speaking to us in a whisper. And that hymn I've quoted goes on to speak of Christ becoming obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. There is Jesus stripped, literally: naked on a cross, vulnerable and shorn of power and majesty. This is God unplugged: beginning at Christ's birth and carrying through to his death - before God exalts him and raises him again to glory and to full crescendo. But that stripping down gets to the heart of who God is. It gets to the heart of love which renounces everything for the sake of the beloved. Now we see the God of power and might in a new light. We hear God differently.

That brings us back to Covid and this Christmas. Maybe it's good for us to celebrate Christmas this way: shorn of all the clutter and devoid of all the noise and pared down to essentials. For yes, of course, family gatherings are wonderful and to be treasured - but Christmas is not essentially about family gatherings. And yes, shopping and gifts can be a way of showing love and appreciation of one another – wonderful! - but Christmas is not essentially about shopping and gifts. And the bar at the end of my street brings joy to my heart when I see it decorated to the nines and so warm and inviting – but Christmas is not about bars and pubs no matter how gezellig. Christmas, stripped down to essentials is about God in a manger. It's about God making room for himself in a world that says, 'full up!' It's about God stripped down and made vulnerable. Christmas unplugged might mean that we hear the Christmas song sung differently from what we are used to – and sung more faithfully, and more truthfully. Amen.