

Christmas 2020

“We even sold the star on the Christmas tree!” Philip exclaimed. This is not the beginning of a Christmas story for children young and old! Let me put that sentence “We even sold the star on the Christmas tree!” into context. During the second and third week of Advent Christ Church between lockdowns held a pop-up bazaar in the church centre as an alternative to our annual and much anticipated, appreciated and enjoyed mega bazaar of past years. The Christmas tree with its star stood on the pavement by the church centre door to lure customers into the centre to purchase Christmas cards made from last year’s Christmas cards, Christmas crackers and Jennie’s cakes, jams and chutneys stall, as well as new books. We even, but ssh keep it to yourself, held a raffle. Although reduced to five stalls two of the stalls performed better than in previous years, two did as well as usual, only the books were down, but the reason is obvious. Philip obviously being an entrepreneur at heart even sold the star that adorned the pop-up bazaar Christmas tree. Let me mention in passing a member of our congregation inspired perhaps by the pop-up bazaar raised to my amazement 800 euros by making and selling samosas. It has been immensely encouraging to see how people in the main are pulling together. We may not be as many as before the first lockdown, but there is vibrancy. There is a can-do spirit about.

There is a tradition in the philatelic world to design and print Christmas stamps at Christmas. Being old school I like to purchase Christmas stamps for our Christmas mail... In passing I have to mention this year’s Austrian one euro stamp for mail within Europe. It depicts a winter scene by Pieter Brueghel the Younger that hangs in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and is entitled *Winter landscape with ice skaters and bird trap*. On the stamp you can see people skating and people playing something that to a Canadian observer looks awfully like two people playing ice hockey. If you

grow up in Canada you know that hockey was invented in Canada! You can't have people playing hockey in 16th Netherlands, as I said hockey was invented by Canadians...

But the two Austrian Christmas stamps that caught my attention were both worth 85 cents and are intended for letters and postcards within Austria up to 20 grams. The first stamp depicts a Christmas tree topped by a star, but if one looks a little closer the Christmas tree doesn't have any branches or needles. It is a Christmas tree in outline only? The tree is made up of simple things for the most part like hot tea, mulled wine, sparkling wine for toasting, spices like cinnamon, cloves, anise and a slice of orange. There is a stick of rock candy, a gingerbread man, Christmas cookies (Weihnachtsgebäck) and sweets. It used to be a common custom to give each other small trays of one's own obviously delicious Weihnachtsgebäck. For those in charge of Christmas dinner there is even - you may envy this - a ready cooked turkey depicted. Additionally there are fir branches with bulbs, holly, ribbons, pine cones and a flowering poinsettia, also called the winter rose. And the star that adorns the tree is made from the plant star anise, which surprise, surprise grows in the form of a star. It is originally from south east Asia and has been in use in European kitchens since the 17th century.

The other 85-cent Christmas stamp shows a Nativity scene dating from the 13th century. It is taken from a codex named 259/7 and is housed in the Styrian monastery library of Vorau. The colours are magnificent. They stand out. They catch the eye. They invite us to have a closer look. In the foreground you see the Holy Family. The ox and ass are safely in the stable munching happily on some hay and with just a pinch of imagination they seem to be enjoying a chat. Mary is lying down on what looks like a wicker mat, while feeding the Christchild. Joseph's expression I must say is indeterminable. Jesus, Mary and Joseph each have a halo, but Jesus is marked by three red bars foreshadowing his suffering and his death "for me,

for you”, for us on the cross. The woven wicker mat on which Mary is lying reminds me of a figure from the Old Testament. It reminds me of Moses, who was placed in a basket woven of papyrus and sealed with bitumen and who was drawn from the waters of the Nile by pharaoh’s daughter. The symbolism is telling. Moses was to lead the people of Israel out of slavery into the promised land of Canaan. Jesus in turn will lead the people out of slavery to sin and death to life, into an everlasting kingdom that will not fade away. And in the middle of this depiction of the Nativity there is what looks like a baptismal font. For if we have been baptized into a death like his surely we are also baptized into a resurrection like his. Through his birth, his life lived amongst us as one of and what it accomplishes make actual in baptism that we are drawn into new life.

And yes again there is the star in the sky! The Christmas star. There has been and there is much speculation about the Christmas star over the years and on Monday night, the winter equinox, the longest night of the year, Jupiter and Saturn were again so aligned that some suggested again this is the star the Magi saw and followed.

By now you must be asking yourselves why spend so much time on two Christmas stamps one so obviously secular, while the other sacred? To my mind they do not cancel each other, but rather they belong to one another. I am holding them in a creative tension. Ours is not to make them one, saying it’s all the same, but at Christmas to understand how they stand in relation to one another. You might even say how they complement each other. Last Sunday I said that heaven came to earth that earth may be lifted up to heaven as captured in some lines of a Christmas carol

Joy! Joy!
Jesus Christ was born for this!
He hath ope'd the heav'nly door,
And man is blessed evermore.

Christ was born for this!
Christ was born for this!

This is what I call the vertical axis. Tonight I want to stress the horizontal axis that we also celebrate at Christmas. We don't or we shouldn't play the horizontal or vertical off against each other, but it is a fine balancing act that we must always be attending to. We can easily fall into too much religiosity or too little or turn Christmas into something that has nothing to do with the child drawn from the womb of a young woman that reminds us of Moses being drawn out of the waters of the Nile.

Tonight we affirm that there is much to give thanks for. This is not Realitätsverweigerung, but to put this moment, this year into perspective. There is much to celebrate. There is much to enjoy. There is much to give thanks for. In the midst of our lives and even at this time we must not forget to give thanks and celebrate. We are facing an unprecedented challenge for this generation that previous ages also faced, while the challenges that were more pressing a year ago have been put on the back burner for now. And as a traditional English table grace asks every year, And make us mindful of the needs of others. Note the word mindful, long before the present trendiness of mindfulness. We are a mindful people. We rejoice with those who rejoice. We mourn with those who mourn. We are a hopeful people. Tonight Christ is drawn from the womb of a woman Mary into the world so that we might have life in all its fulness, as he says.

Today is a feast day. Today is a day when we take time to give thanks and celebrate with Christians the world over and in our families that "Christ was born for this" to open the gate of heaven and to draw us into the world that in Christ we may affirm its goodness and name the sin that is also an ever present reality and our share in it.

Philip did sell the star that adorned the pop-up bazaar Christmas tree, but in its stead let us shine brightly empowered by God's grace alive within us that it may be given to us to lead people to the place of the Saviour's birth. "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is heaven."