

Thoughts on faith and light for Christmas

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I love my neighborhood at Christmas. All but the most severe humbuggers in our little section of Torrance drape strings of lights on the Chinese Elms, attracting longer strings of cars full of families who have made a tradition of driving through "Candy Cane Lane." Some houses go all out - Ferris wheels, trains, Shreks, "Nightmare Before Christmas" displays and, of course, nativity scenes. It's all wonderfully provincial.

But in rereading the various accounts of the birth of Jesus in the gospels, I came upon a statement made by a Jewish man named Simeon that caused me to pause and reflect. Simeon was described by the apostle Luke as "just and devout," indicating that what he had to say was worthy of my pausing and reflecting.

As Joseph and Mary brought the baby Jesus to the temple, according to Jewish custom, Simeon told Mary, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel." Simeon was indicating that Jesus would be anything but ignored. His presence in the land would be a source of light, life and delight to some and a source of consternation and stumbling to others.

In many ways the environment into which Jesus was born 2,000 years ago was very similar to the environment we find ourselves in today in our own country. Israel, like America, was highly religious. Virtually all males had been circumcised, just as almost everybody reading this column has been baptized, the New Covenant version of circumcision.

Sadly, religion in Israel, similar to today, descended into profiteering, commercialism and social posturing. Inclusion in the religious community was necessary for networking and prestige. Therefore, insincere outward professions of faith became the norm. As an American politician would find it difficult to win the presidential office apart from some profession of faith in God or Christ -

regardless of whether ethical principles consonant with that profession accompanied it - the contemporaries of Simeon would be ostracized from their culture without at least a verbal confession of belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

When Simeon foretold that Jesus was destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, he was announcing that Jesus would push the envelope of these superficial confessions - some would rise and others would fall. His light would shine in their midst, exposing their spiritual bones. Many Israelites would bow before His glory while others eventually displayed their true colors with the declaration, "We have no king but Caesar."

Similar to today, Jesus Christ had a polarizing effect upon His culture. In 70 A.D. the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies epitomized Simeon's affirmation of the fall of many in Israel. The persecuted, yet faithful church is what rose from the ashes. But Simeon's warning still applies. It is only the truly faithful (known but to God and themselves) in the church who will rise on the last day.

Simeon's prophecy contains a message for all the cultures of human history - including ours. As America becomes increasingly multicultural we see professions of faith in Christ morphing into religious systems hardly recognized as Christian in any biblical sense. We also observe non-Christian, ecumenical and anti-Christian religious systems (including atheism) all vying for supremacy. And it would be the height of folly for a people to conclude that their decisions regarding who, or what, they hold as supreme will not have serious consequences for good or ill, for a rising or falling.

Simeon went on to explain that, through Jesus, "the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." The discomfort experienced by human nature at the heralding of Jesus Christ is a discomfort of being fully known and accountable - naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. Even in writing this I am cognizant of the numerous people who will be offended that this newspaper would print such unambiguously Christian sentiments. Some have gone so far as to say my columns are a violation of church and state - as if the state owned this paper!

We, like disobedient children trying to ignore their parents, will seek to ignore the implications of the birth of a baby in Bethlehem. But like a loving parent, that baby will not ignore us. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has been the source of the greatest blessings in human history and is man's only hope for blessings in eternity.

May we all be rich in thought this Christmas, seeking to plumb the depths of the profound words of a just and devout man telling us more of the event which produced this holiday than we would have otherwise considered.