

God's Great Party Invitation

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I was converted in the mid-1960s, that pre-charismatic era when evangelical existence was carefully regulated and circumscribed. No cinema - though as a Jewish girl my first real encounter with Christ had been at the movie, Ben Hur. Definitely no theatre - and I had given my life to him at the York Mystery plays. The arts, and in fact anything that worked on the senses, were subject to suspicion. Only the brain was kosher.

The day must begin with a "Quiet Time" of Bible reading and prayer. I relied on it for my sense of spiritual self-righteousness, and felt agitated and guilty when I had small children, who seemed to have a built in waking mechanism five minutes before my alarm clock went off, and wouldn't even let me go to the loo without banging on the door. A "family prayer time" was deemed essential, as "the family that prays together stays together", but no one explained how to do it. When I called the children in from playing in the garden or watching TV for prayer, they didn't exactly greet the idea with enthusiasm. Church attendance twice on Sundays was mandatory, but my children wouldn't settle in the creche, so I spent the morning walking them around the graveyards, so as not to disrupt the congregation. In the evening I babysat, as my husband was about to train for ministry and was more in demand than I was. Had I not been committed to the concept of Christian community I might at this point have joined the thousands of jaded disciples who, sadly, abandon church because they it doesn't meet their needs.

Instead, I became convinced that while personal prayer and study was important, there had to be a better, more natural, more integrated way of relating to the living Christ, and of being the body of Christ - especially when it came to the spiritual nurture of children. My own religious education in a practising Jewish family was far from perfect or I would never have been lured into reading the forbidden pages of the New Testament. But as I reflected on the candlelit feasts and festivals around the family meal table that I missed so much, I realised that I was introduced, not to belief, but to a Jewish way of life that was a rich and vibrant context in which faith could flourish. Sadly, we have no equivalent "Christian way of life", no home and few church festivals so full of wonder, colour and glory that our children's happiest memories are associated with Christian celebration that binds them to their heritage. Was it possible to recreate what had manifestly been lost somewhere in the church's history?

For centuries the church has only given lip service to any spiritual focal point outside the confines of its building. It has taken prime responsibility for children's spiritual education and parents have left it to Sunday School, divesting men of their key spiritual role. It was incumbent on every Jewish man to teach his children and his children's children the law of Moses, a trade and how to swim - in other words, the rudiments of faith, education, morality and survival. It was the father's responsibility to bless them on the Sabbath, and teach them the traditions of his ancestors. But within a hundred years of the birth of the church, the Communion Service was

removed from its home context, formalised in a church building, and overseen by a spiritual professional who even took the title “Father”.

By the fourth century, when Emperor Constantine made Christianity the established faith of the Roman Empire, the institutionalised church, with its sophisticated buildings and hierarchical structures, already reflected the highly ordered world he ruled, not the warmer home and community-focussed, Hebraic world of the early Christians.

The first disciples in the United Kingdom - the Celts - were Hebraic in their approach to their faith, worshipping God with what they called the “five stringed harp” of their senses, as they sang and prayed their way through the milking, the sowing, the weaving, the breastfeeding and the baking. Home was their spiritual centre. But they also enjoyed small, synagogue-style, weekly gatherings, accessible to every member of the community, with whom they shared their food and purse. Larger centres, such as minster churches or religious communities, welcomed pilgrims, fostered the arts, and made much of the festivals, taking on the celebratory role of the Temple.

The Roman authorities could not tolerate any potentially subversive influence, and by the seventh century had used their political might to tear the heart out of Celtic worship, and ensure that Roman-style Christianity dominated the English church. And so it has remained to this day. As a new, culture-shocked Christian, I often used to wonder, “If Jesus walked in now would he know what this was?”

This more austere, cerebral, Romanised model of church served the age of Reason or Enlightenment well enough - the philosophy based on scepticism, individualism, and rationalism that dominated British thinking from the seventeenth to the middle of the last century. But today’s Post-modernism, with its suspicion of institutions, structures and pomp, and its love of the subjective, “feel-good” factor, leaves it looking archaic and outmoded.

People are no longer used to passive listening, to activity that doesn’t engage the senses, feed the imagination or demand an emotional response. A friend said to me recently, “I need visual stimulation, but the church only ever appeals to the mind. It’s a long time since anything there made me jump for joy.” If church has become dull for adults, what must it be like for children? Small wonder we have almost lost an entire generation of them.

In the Scriptures, one of the key hallmarks of the Christian is joy. So where has it gone? One of God’s first gifts to human beings was Sabbath - a time for play, for fun, for recreation. The books of Moses are full of detailed descriptions of how to enjoy feasts and festivals. Three of them - Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles - each lasted around seven days. With a three-day journey by foot from the Galilee, that would have involved Jesus in a minimum of six weeks holiday a year, without counting all the other minor celebrations he kept at home. Pilgrims camped on the hillside outside Jerusalem, where they enjoyed heady mix of carnival and games, pageant and praise, good food and talent shows - a glorified Spring Harvest? Nehemiah tells the people not to weep in repentance at the Feast of Trumpets, as God commands rejoicing on his festivals. Instead, they’re to go home and party, and then, “the joy of the Lord will be your

strength.”

So it is no surprise then that when Jesus invites people into the kingdom of God, it often comes in the form of a party invitation. There are the made-up stories he tells - of the child who kicks his father in teeth, then is welcomed home with a fabulous function, and of the landowner who throws a magnificent banquet and invites all and sundry in from the streets. And there are the personal encounters, for example with that little wretch, Zaccheus. To him the Gospel or good news is simply, “Zaccheus, come down from that tree. Me and the lads are partying at your house today.” In the book of Revelation, to the church in Laodicea that has slammed the door in his face, Jesus says, “Open up and let me come in and I will eat with you.” In other words, “We’ll be reconciled, and when fellowship is restored, we’ll party together because there is nothing I enjoy more.” Even the angels in heaven party when one lost sheep returns to the fold.

The Hebrew word for party is *simcha*. It means joy. I am not sure that any outsider looking at the church today would guess that God was holding out an invitation to the best party ever, to an eternal joy far outweighing the effects of binge drinking. And the only way they will find out is when his followers begin to see the world through his eyes, not the eyes of Aristotle and Plato - the ancient classical philosophers who believed that any part of the human being other than the rational mind was inferior and suspect. Jesus gave his imagination free rein. His story-telling fed on the funny and mundane goings-on of ordinary people. What he saw, heard, smelt, touched and tasted - bread, wine, fish, sheep, birds, flowers, lamps, brooms and trees - metamorphosed into symbols of God’s involvement in his world.

We too need a more integrated personal spirituality, instead of hacking off our religious bit and bringing it out to match the occasion. All it takes at any meeting is for someone to say, “let’s pray”, for the gathered to rearrange their bodies and faces in holy mode - as if God had been absent up to that point. If New Age teaches us anything, it’s that people are searching for spiritual integrity - a reality where faith impacts every part of our lives. Only when my imagination feeds on things to enthuse, entrance, inspire and transfix me, not just in a glorious view or at a fabulous concert but also at the kitchen sink and office desk, will I begin to create a celebratory environment at home, at work, and in my community. For example, that tree that always gets in the way of parking the car, becomes instead a symbol of God’s ongoing faithfulness through the centuries.

We also need a more accessible, integrated way of being church, based on the Hebraic-Celtic model of home, community and grand “Temple-style” celebration. When the children were small I experimented with a family sabbath meal once a week. We lit candles, reviewed the week, prayed for one another, read the Scriptures, told stories, sang a few songs, and shared bread and wine. Sometimes it worked. On other occasions, the children would play up and insist on singing “Twinkle, twinkle little star” or some other profound, well-known spiritual song. As they got older they invited their friends and we invited in the neighbours. No matter how agnostic our guests, I have no recollection of their being any other than profoundly moved by the whole experience.

It was only when Joel went to university and continued the tradition in his room in hall with an ever-increasing band of friends, with beer or lemonade when he had no wine, and biscuits when he had no bread, that we realised that generally speaking, the idea seemed to have paid off.

Home groups tend to be social or spiritual - ten pin bowling or Bible study - but why separate leisure and cerebral pursuits? They can be much more creative - occasionally involving children, eating together, telling stories by candle-light, sharing testimony and simple symbols, learning new ways of praying, exploring and designing liturgies and rituals, celebrating festivals, using the arts, creating occasions to which we can invite friends and neighbours.

Once a month at least, and on festivals, local-church day, then becomes celebration day, a focal point and high spot for the Christian community - creative, interactive, sensual, moving, joyful, uplifting. Yes it takes more planning. But from experience, once a service is done the first time, for example a Tabernacles-style Harvest Festival, it only needs tweaks and refinements the following year. Our imaginations are rusty through disuse, but once they are sharpened, polished and restored, they will thrive on creating a new, more vibrant kind of church. And what more constructive way to invest our energy than in designing celebration that profoundly impacts the secular community? Our feasts, here, claimed the Jewish sages are *moedim* - rehearsals for the great banquet to come. So why not practice now? The contemporary sage, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, said, "Wonder, not doubt, is the beginning of knowledge".

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