

Words Of Christmas' Past

Christmas approaches and I think again, as I do each year, that what I write here should turn upon the season in some way – and therein lies a conundrum: is it the end of the year at hand, or is birth anew, the Christ child and the year to come.

December seems to mark the passing of time for most of us. We don't want to see the city lights or the decorations at the mall. We don't want the PESA Christmas Party announcement. They all mean the year has passed, and life with it, and always there's so much we didn't do.

Christians did not unthinkingly set the birth of their Saviour at the dying of the year; they set it perfectly so, on the mid-winter moment of rebirth, the winter solstice, when nature's unforgiving cycle turns past the darkest day and sorcery of winter and looks towards spring. I thought, for my 10th birthday column (I missed the first issue) I would write about Christmas, and some of its links to ancient mythology and ritual.

There is great and frightening religious and cultural conflict in the world today – perhaps more so than there ever was, and that is worrying, given history's record. Twenty years ago now, in the midst of a local religio-cultural conflict – the drilling on Noonkanbah Station in the Canning Basin – my research of Aboriginal beliefs lead me back to a study of the origins of religion and then forward through the historical development of the major religious systems.

I was amazed and reassured by the recurring patterns in the myth and ritual across the millennia, and I thought some simple remembering of those patterns in the Christmas event might be appropriate for this occasion.

About 10,000 years ago, as men began to turn from hunting to farming, they cut down the trees for farmland and began to build their villages and cities. With such a change inevitably came new gods, still linked to the cycle of the seasons, the inescapable reality of life and death, but now increasingly linked to the heavens and the pattern of order in the night sky.

For millennia men had thought that spirits, both good and bad, ruled life and nature, and that ritual and magic could sustain the order of the world. Now the annual cycle of decay and rebirth was personified in these new gods, and the seasons reflected their life and death.

One of the earliest such gods was Tammuz, more commonly known as Adonis, but that is a misnomer by the ancient Greeks, meaning simply 'Lord'. Tammuz probably originated with the Sumerians about 4000 BC but his image has been reflected in many mythological mirrors, notably the Greek.

In Babylonian mythology, Tammuz was the lover of the Earth Goddess Ishtar. He dies amidst great lamenting, and when Ishtar, in her grief, follows him into the underworld of the dead, all love and fertility vanish from the earth. Higher gods intervene. Tammuz is returned to life, and nature is restored. This was held to occur annually, and the seasons were seen to follow his journey of death and resurrection.

This is a tale told in almost every society and culture, past and present: the man/god must die and go into the underworld to find the source of life, be it fire or the end of evil, and bring truth and salvation to humanity with his resurrection. This is what the great 20th Century mythologist Joseph Campbell has called 'the Hero's Journey', in a life's work that translated this ancient and universal mythology into a metaphor for all our lives.

The early gods were not seen as separate from man (that belief would emerge later) and the king of the tribe was commonly the embodiment of the deity. In this role of the man-god, he became responsible for nature's fertility and order, and he did this not by any magical powers but by the order and fertility of his own life.

There was a downside to such divinity – as there should be. If a strong and lusty king promised a bountiful nature, then an old or ailing king was a danger to all. From this would come a belief that the king must die, not just as man but as God, before any weakness or misfortune should overtake him and his people.

At the basic level, the king was subject to challenge by combat, but this gave way to a more structured ritual whereby the king was killed at a specified time each year, ensuring constant rebirth of the god and nature. This was not popular with the kings of course, and alternate rituals soon emerged, based on the belief of a separation between men and gods. What was important was that the God died, the man-King didn't have to! He could live so long as someone died!

In some cultures, a temporary king was appointed for a few days, sometimes a condemned prisoner but often just a citizen, and then executed after his short reign. The tribes in Israel, among others as far apart as Sweden and the slopes of Mt Kilimanjaro, believed there should be a blood bond between the king and the one who died in his stead, and from this came the tradition that the son of the god would die in his father's stead. This tradition grew also in Israel: it was the King's son, and not the father, who would die. One of his roles in death of the son of God was to take upon himself the sins of the people and give them new life.

There also evolved in various cultures a ritual of baking bread in the image of the God. So

might the people by consuming it share in his death and resurrection, and be sustained. Adonis and his equivalents in many cultures were closely linked to this ritual, and the bread of the god's body was a sacred host.

It is not surprising then, that when a Saviour came among the Israelites, that he be not God, but the Son of God. And that he be born in Bethlehem, a name meaning 'House of Bread', in the shade of a grove of trees held to be sacred to Adonis a thousand years before, when he was worshipped as the bread of life.

In ancient times December 25th was charted as the winter solstice, the Birthday of the Sun and fires were lit across Europe to mark this occasion. The spirits of the dead and the witches and goblins had been abroad since Halloween, the night of passage from autumn to winter. With the solstice came the longest night of winter, and thereafter the morrow would bring the sun daily closer as the snow melted into spring water. Life was renewed by the passing of that dark night.

Twelve days of revelry followed, ending on January 6, the Epiphany. James Fraser, in his brilliant work of a century ago, *The Golden Bough*, suggests this may have begun as an intercalary period inserted in the calendar to align the solar and the lunar year. Such a time, outside the natural cycle of the sun and moon, was extraordinary, and an auspicious moment for a birth and Saviour so long foreseen in Israel.

Actually, the birthday of Christ was originally on January 6th but was reassigned sometime in the 4th Century to December 25th. The coincidence with the winter solstice seems deliberately chosen. The great bonfires of celebration at that time we remember still in token with the yuletide log.

This comment is a simple and selective summary, and I do not pretend to have remembered all the facts. What I have remembered is the revelation that Christianity was not separated by culture or tradition from other religions, but evolved from them. Such an historical view can trouble some people I know, and should not. Syncretising beliefs and synchronising dates does not invalidate a god to those who worship.

The Hindu have a saying that the religions of the world are like fingers pointing at God and that we must not look at the fingers but at where they're pointing. This is my point: across the centuries we have been kneeling at different altars but we have been praying to the same God. The ancient links of the Christmas time remind us of that, and I think the remembering worthwhile.

Peace on earth to men of goodwill.

Peter Purcell