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Christmas Jam

I'm not a jam maker - but I know a woman who is. I'm told that raspberry and blackcurrant jams - unlike strawberry - don't require the addition of pectin, since they have enough of that in the fruit already, and will set well.

Now Christians, like jams, (at least for the purposes of this article), can be divided into two groups. There are those who feel that God, like pectin, has to be added to every situation. He's not there, so he needs to be brought in. This is explicit religion, made loud and clear so that there is little chance of not being noticed. It's a very worthy aim, stemming from the feeling that good news should be shared with others. And then there are those who feel that it is not necessary to add God to the recipe, because he is, in fact, already there. God is out there already, in people's lives. His presence might be hidden or unrecognised, but present he is. What the church therefore needs is a bit of trust, a smidgeon of confidence, and the willingness to cooperate with God's purposes.

Temperamentally and emotionally, my sympathies are with the second group. I like Jesus' teaching, often overlooked, which says that 'the kingdom of God is within you'. God is there in every place, and in every human situation, whether it be bright and celebratory, or dark and dismal. God has been there, done that. The story of Jesus' birth is about identification and solidarity with ordinary people, and not about divine condescension.

This is what I understand by the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation, the coming amongst us of God in the person of Jesus. Taking this view makes it easier to respect the often deep interest in spirituality which many of us have, whether or not we regard ourselves as signed-up Christians. The Christmas Story does present a hard hitting picture of the Christian God. I remember a friend of mine who preached a strong social justice sermon at the Christmas Midnight, and afterwards a person in the congregation told him that she saw 'no connection between Christmas and homelessness.' The Son of God who is born in a feeding trough challenges us to move beyond a generalised feel-good spirituality.

So as we prepare to celebrate the Incarnation this Christmas, the Immanuel of God-with-us, there's another chance to start making a few connections, and to give ourselves some time to uncover the God within. Sometimes successful careers and busy lives of activity and movement stunt the exploration of one's interior landscape. Christmas can be a good time to re-start the process and look within.

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