

The Turning of the Year

For millennia, mankind has observed the decline of the days and the onset of winter. For those in the temperate northern hemisphere, we are right at that point now. For those in the temperate southern half of the world, you are at exactly the opposite end of the cycle - your turn will come in 6 months' time!

For those at the poles, it is even more extreme and those in the tropics see very little difference in day length. 'Winter' and 'Summer' are meaningless words in a tropical vocabulary and in the extreme polar regions they are almost synonymous with 'Night' and 'Day'.

Western culture was born in the temperate northern climes and has somehow claimed the right to dictate its norms to other parts of the world. Back in those early years, the shortening of the days was often attributed to the anger of the gods, as if daylight was gradually being withdrawn as a punishment for the misdeeds of the people.

As humans began to appreciate that the days always started to lengthen again, they calculated the cycle of day length and the annual calendar was born. The seasons fitted together in exactly the same sequence, year after year. No-one knew about the inclination of the earth at about 23 degrees, the simple fact that determines seasonal variation as we travel round the sun.

Confusion arose, of course, when it was discovered that the moon's travels around the earth do not fit exactly into one solar year. The lunar calendar, estimated at 28 days, fits 13 months into one earth year - with one day left over! The actual orbit of

the moon around the earth takes just over 27 days, so the close approximation of 13 lunar months in 364 days is flawed, too.

Even the earth's solar year is not a whole number of earth days, so adding an extra day at the end of February every 4 years doesn't quite get the earth's solar orbit right and sometimes we don't have a leap year when we might expect one.

But the turning of the year remains. Every year, sometime between 20th and 22nd December in the north and 20th and 22nd June in the south, the days start to lengthen again, as they always have done. The ancient Sumerian civilisation, more than 4000 years ago, celebrated the 12 days of Zagmuk, when their chief deity Marduk was supposed to have overcome the evil domain of Chaos, whose resurgence had been exemplified by the diminishing daylight hours.

The ancient Egyptian civilisation had similar traditions, as did the Romans, who honoured Saturn (the Roman god of agriculture) and the birth of Mithras (the Persian god of light) over the period 17th December to 1st January. By before AD 300, these had been amalgamated into the Dies Natalis Solis Invicti, the 'Birthday of the Unconquered Sun'. Connections to the new agricultural year and re-awakened daylight are obvious.

It took a Roman emperor, Constantine, to 'Christianise' these festivals as part of his 'organised religion' approach to Christian faith, in about AD 335. Just a few years later, the Pope Julius 1 decreed that the birth of Jesus would now be celebrated on December 25th. The genuineness of Constantine's own faith is open to question, but he made Christianity the official religion of his empire - and institutionalised Christianity was born!

What had previously been a vital faith, spreading vigorously in the face of earlier official persecution, had now 'arrived' as part of the establishment, and the insidious practice of syncretism was given official endorsement.

The approach of syncretism is to try to make a new faith system more acceptable by tagging it on to the traditions of older beliefs. There are many examples of this in buildings as well as in traditions, especially where Christian church buildings were erected on the site of ancient burial mounds or 'holy places'. Sadly, the history of some so-called 'missionary work' among animist tribes in South America is a glaring example of such dishonesty, re-labelling people as 'Christian' while leaving them snared in their old animist practices.

Syncretism has no integrity. Instead of the message of the apostles in the book of Acts, to turn from false gods and old practices and receive the grace of God which is only available through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, it somehow tries to merge the two together into a 'comfortable' mixture, which in reality offers no comfort whatsoever.

So what has all this to do with the turning of the year? Just that this is the time of year when many Christians follow the practices of old non-Christian traditions and claim that they are 'celebrating' the birth of Jesus. Of course the birth of Jesus is recorded in the New Testament but there is not the slightest hint of any suggestion that it should be celebrated on a special day and, in fact, believers seem to have got on very well without such celebrations for the first few centuries.

Although it seems that the apostle Paul may have celebrated the Passover - hardly surprising with his Jewish roots and the enormous significance of the Lord Jesus representing the

Passover sacrifice - he expresses his frustration with the Galatian believers over their 'religious observances' of special days and years: *"But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have laboured over you in vain."* (**Galatians 4:9-11**)

Paul also says that some people will want to observe days and others won't, and that is completely OK. *"One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God."* (**Romans 14:5-6**)

But with so-called 'Christmas', can you honestly 'observe it for the Lord'? With all its pagan baggage and religious overtones? Can you really tell your non-Christian friends about the 'real meaning of Christmas' when you know that is simply an ancient pagan festival that has been hijacked by institutionalised Christianity? (Did you really want to be part of that?)

So, am I celebrating? Yes and no. You will have realised that I am definitely not interested in 'celebrating Christmas', but yes, I can quietly celebrate the turning of the year, as I see the days beginning to lengthen again. Spring may lie beyond weeks of frosts and apparent barrenness, but it is coming . . . the year has turned!

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25 December 2015