

## ***Seeing the Wood for the Trees!***

*Malachi 3<sup>1-4</sup>; The Benedictus; Philippians 1<sup>3-11</sup>; Luke 3<sup>1-6</sup>*

*The Word of the Lord came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.  
[Luke 3<sup>2</sup>]*

It would be impossible to ignore the fact that we are surrounded by Christmass Trees! There are some Churches that don't allow a Christmass Tree inside and argue that, once Christmass arrives, it is the Crib that should be the focus and that nothing should be allowed to detract from that.

So have we just given in to Christmass being celebrated in anticipation of the event, rather than the tradition in the Church of celebrating the Festival until the Feast of Candlemass on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February?

Is there a danger that the tinsel and the twinkles obscure the Christchild and the message of the Incarnation? Of course not.

We do know that the Tree has been used as a focus of pagan worship from prehistoric times, but before we get too hot under the collar about that we are quite happy that the Church adopted the date of a pagan festival for the celebration of Christmass because the probably date of Jesus' birth in April 4BC would clash with Easter (and we probably have fewer holidays as a result).

We also know that the Egyptians used evergreen branches on the shortest day as a sign that life conquers death and the Romans did the same (with the addition holly and mistletoe with berries as the defiant fruit in winter) at the Feast of Saturnalia.

We know, too, that the practice of decorating trees goes back into ancient traditions in Russia and in India and was meant to encourage the 'tree spirits' to return to bring life to the trees.

BUT, Christians have a long tradition of taking symbols and converting them and using them to tell the Gospel story:

- ✘ Martin Luther was the first to put candles on the Christmass Tree as a visual image to remind children of the starry heavens from which the Saviour came to be born to save us. How could he ever have imagined how that idea would evolve after the first retail sale of Christmass Trees in New York City in 1862?

But that does lead us to the great and powerful metaphors that we can use.

- ✘ Light: Jesus is the light of the world – that is a keystone of Christian believe and Christian mission. Into all the darkness – spiritual and moral – in which we live we know that the smallest of lights defeats darkness. We know too that when light is joined to other light it intensifies. So our message is clear: Jesus, the light of the world, defeats the darkness and Jesus, the light of the world, defends us in the darkness
- ✘ Life & resurrection: Christianity stands alone as an evergreen in the deciduous world of decaying belief systems in the world. Alone, Christianity promises and assures the believer that they are forgiven before the judgement (no waiting to see what the scales have to say); alone Christianity promises that death is to be born into the new life that God already has for us.

I am not giving in – however many trees surround us, they are not the symbol of Christmass – but they can be a pointer to hope: of light and life. To know what that means we need the crib and the cross.