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The Cultivation of Christmas Trees

This is the title of one of T.S. Eliot's poems (printed below). As I reread it the other day, I was struck again how much I believe it. It strikes a chord deep within. Eliot's ability to retain the essence of the imagination and to allow it understanding - without destroying it - is not just his genius, and that of poetry altogether, it is also what lures and satisfies the contemporary spirit. His poetry is truly a sign of Christian incarnation.

In "The Cultivation of Christmas Trees," Eliot frames the imagination of the child as not only that of the child but more truly as the imagination of man, the true beginning point and reservoir of memory, thought, and finally the vision of God.

With the imagery of light and darkness, with scriptural prophecy and fulfillment, with angelic hosts proclaiming the birth of the Christ child, with tender hymns and moving music, the Christmas season portrays the supreme imagination of Christianity. Eliot captures the real spirituality of Christmas in a joyous expectation that must never be allowed to become routine. But while this is so, Eliot's poem extends also beyond Christmas to the idea of the cultivation of the Christian soul and of Christian culture in general. This idea of cultivation is what I hope will inform our life of prayer, study, and education at St. John's. I reprint the entire poem for your pleasure and meditation.

There are several attitudes towards Christmas,

Some of which we may disregard:

The social, the torpid, the patently commercial,

The rowdy (the pubs being open till midnight),

And the childish - which is not that of the child

For whom the candle is a star, and the gilded angel

Spreading its wings at the summit of the tree

Is not only a decoration, but an angel.

The child wonders at the Christmas Tree:

**Let him continue in the spirit of wonder
At the Feast as an event not accepted as a pretext;
So that the glittering rapture, the amazement
Of the first remembered Christmas Tree,
So that the surprises, delight in new possessions
(Each one with its peculiar and exciting smell),
The expectation of the goose or turkey
And the expected awe on its appearance,
So that the reverence and the gaiety
May not be forgotten in later experience,
In the bored habituation, the fatigue, the tedium,
The awareness of death, the consciousness of failure,
Or in the piety of the convert
Which may be tainted with a self-conceit
Displeasing to God and disrespectful to the children
(And here I remember also with gratitude
St. Lucy, her carol, and her crown of fire):
So that before the end, the eightieth Christmas
(By "eightieth" meaning whichever is the last)
The accumulated memories of annual emotion
May be concentrated into a great joy
Which shall be also a great fear, as on the occasion
When fear came upon every soul:
Because the beginning shall remind us of the end
And the first coming of the second coming.**

My hope is that our future, especially our life of prayer and education, will very much follow Eliot's idea of cultivation. We might simply bemoan the present state of our world, eat, drink, and be merry, until our own Christian inheritance erodes away from under our feet. But those are the attitudes of what Eliot calls the social, the torpid, the patently commercial and the rowdy. Ours must be the way of the Christian imagination.

With the Bible in one hand and the Book of Common Prayer in the other, with the treasures of the English language, and with the music and art of Christendom to form us, we will continue the wonder, the amazement, the delight of the Christian Church in her entirety, just like "the first-remembered Christmas" fills our memories. Ours is the calling to keep the tradition entire with the same kind of anticipation that Eliot describes for the Christmas feast.

Such a cultivation of Christian culture will see to it that "the reverence and the gaiety may not be forgotten in later experience." Later experience means the life of adults. By prayer and good will, by revisiting our daily priorities in order to purge them of the dross of worldliness, by continuous renewal of the thoughts of our hearts, we seek the reverence and the gaiety. And in this seeking we grow as adults and become examples to our children, examples of God's own children, given to the wonder, amazement, and delight of our religion. That is our tradition to pass on, not bored habituation, the fatigue, the tedium, the awareness of death and the consciousness of failure.

Cultivation in reverence and gaiety is the task of our education for all our members, and especially of our young children. Just as with Christmas, our gift to them must be the expectation of our own souls, that we look for the coming of Christ Jesus with power and great glory! And until that great day, we will do all we can to grow their imagination. They also must learn the great stories of the Bible, feel and smell and see the mystery of worship in our glorious Church, hear the grandeur and excellence of her music, and listen to the Word of God read in the treasure of King James English. If the Christian imagination such as this is what forms and moves the thoughts of our hearts, then we must be ever diligent to keep it, to love it, and to give it to our children, and to anyone whose soul we value as we do our very own.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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