

Daniel's reflection for week-beginning 10th December - Peeling Off The Whitewash - how easily we forget the original vision

There is a story told in Holland about an old church. For many years, all those who used it, on entering, would stop and bow in the direction of a whitewashed wall. No one knew exactly why anybody did that, but everyone had been doing it for such a long time that nobody questioned the habit. It was tradition. It felt right.

One day the parish decided to renovate the church. Among other things, they began to strip the paint off the old walls. While doing this they discovered traces of a painting under the whitewash on the wall towards which everyone always bowed. Very carefully, they continued peeling so as not to damage the picture underneath.

Slowly there emerged a very beautiful centuries-old painting of Christ. Nobody was old enough to have actually seen it. It had been whitewashed over for an hour at least a few centuries. Yet everyone had been bowing to it, not knowing why, but sensing that there was some good reason for the reverence.

Gradually the story was recovered. Everyone was now interested in the whole revelation. Eventually they came to know who painted the picture, why it was painted, what it meant, and why it was so special to their ancestors. They bowed now to the new reverence, joy and meaning.

There is a Christmas lesson for all of us in that story - a message about how we forget the reason for the fuss we make about this week's holidays and festivities. We build the crib, put up the tree, string the lights, play the old hymns, gather the families, write the cards, send the presents and maybe, even go to church. But, like the people in Holland, most of us are not clear anymore about why we are excited. There is very little conscious faith left in our perennial celebration, just a habitual response to a tradition. We are bowing to a whitewashed wall, not knowing why.

Yet, all is not lost. Maybe it is better to come to church at Christmas than not at all; to celebrate the season even in a purely secular manner than not to celebrate it ever; to settle for even the vague connection that many make between Christmas and something really important that happened to our world 2000 years ago. Such moments are never wasted. And maybe, one day, when the world is frightened, and desperate for salvation and peace, someone, somewhere will remember the beautiful painting - and begin, again, to peel off the commercial whitewash. And maybe Pope Francis is that person - the long-awaited poet-bishop who is stripping the Church of its false pomp and stagnant ceremony so we can drink again from the fresh-water wells of Incarnation.