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## EDITORIAL

As this number of the *Bulletin* goes into production, preparations for the Christmas season are well underway in Edinburgh. Festive magazine issues are on the racks, lights are being installed, decorations sneak into place—although there's nothing subtle about the retail arrangements being made. Nor can 'subtle' describe the massive evergreen that will soon be appearing outside New College, festooned with countless bulbs and lit to fanfare worthy of an opening ceremony for the Olympics.

Advent annually poses most poignantly and persistently the age-old conundrum for the people of God: how to live faithfully as people *in* the world, but not *of* it? The question brings a particular crunch to those parts of the majority world where Christianity is still regarded as a newcomer. Christian missionaries have long been accused of cultural imperialism, and sometimes with justification. This perception should be nuanced with an appreciation for their welcome and enduring contributions that came in tandem with a presentation of the gospel. Still, it remains the case that the nature of Christian behaviour in relation to traditional practice in, say, central Africa is felt more sharply as problematic than in the central belt of Scotland.

I wonder if it should be so. I know I'm slow, but it is only in recent years the oddity dawned on me of bringing an evergreen tree of moderate size into one's home for decoration which then serves as a focal point for a pile of presents. What's that about? *Tannenbaum* theology is not hard to find (nor is the 'holly-and-ivy' variety), but it increasingly strikes me as an exercise in optimism, creativity, and wishful thinking. Granting the disputed origins of the practice, its connections to the Christ-event lie somewhere on the continuum of fanciful to blatantly pagan.

In part these reflections are prompted by a recent reading of 2 Kings 17, where the story is told of the resettlement of deportees by the Assyrians in the land of Samaria. Traumas persuade these people of the wisdom of learning the ways of the god of that land, and so a priest of the Lord is sent to them (vv. 27-28). In spite of dedicated teaching, their previous national cults persist even while learning devotion to the Lord. The narrator is clearly uneasy with this state of affairs. While their new worship is described as 'fearing the Lord' (vv. 32, 33, 41), this is 'fear' which is no fear at all (vv. 34, 40).

This story has a frame. Before it (v. 6) we read of the exiles from Israel who simply fade into the places to which they were exiled, the process hastened by years of covenant compromise—especially on the part of those who were meant to be guardians of the tradition as the ensuing comment makes clear. At the other end, we encounter the story of Heze-

kiah, exemplary king of Judah. With the experience of the 'new Samaritans' fresh in our minds, Hezekiah's clear commitment to the reputation of the Lord loses some of its lustre, ultimately taking on a self-serving sheen and leading directly to the deeply compromised reign of his son and successor, Manasseh.

Meanwhile, in November 2011, a SETS day-conference will be taking place in Inverness. Its theme, 'Being the Church Today', addresses a pressing and pointed question in Scotland but hardly for Scotland alone. Disentangling sacrificial and faithful discipleship from compromising cultural trappings is no simple matter, nor is retreat a viable option. But if 2 Kings 17 tells us anything, it is that we can settle far too easily for a form of 'fear' which is no fear. It's worth at least thinking about that spruce tree.

*David Reimer*

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