



In Bondage to Christmas

Hi, my name is Nicholas, and I'm a consumaholic. God help me, I am in bondage to Christmas and cannot free myself. You know what I mean: Christmas not as the simple observance of the birth of our Lord Jesus, but as the three-month-long commercial celebration of greed. Forgive me if I seem more jaded than usual today. I've just come off a long weekend with duty at three 'Dales, a Kmart, and the Big One!

How did this all happen? I was just a mild-mannered bumpkin bishop who wanted to help the poor a little. And it wasn't even about Christmas—except, of course, that it was about Jesus. Come to think of it, there wasn't any Christmas in my neck of the woods in those days. January 6—Jesus' birth, yes, but mostly his Epiphany. Now, everything from October on is about Christmas, but none of it is about Jesus, and I'm trapped in the middle of it all.

It all started, I think, when they made me a saint. Nobody should do that to another human being. Who can live up to it? Once I was canonized, life as I had actually lived it wouldn't do. Everyday Christian service isn't enough for a saint. They needed myths and miracles. Nothing against fantasy and imagination, you know, especially for kids—but when they made me a myth, they pretty well killed off the real me, not to mention the simple concern for the poor.

Still, even in the myths, most countries kept me away from Christmas. A little preparation on December 6, useful for keeping the kids in submission for a few weeks, and then December 25 was left for the Christ Child. I could have lived with that. I still like how it worked in Bavaria. No red suit for me there—still the bishop's outfit, complete with miter and staff. I show up in town with my servant Ruprecht, who, in case you don't know, is pretty much of a sadist. Wears rags and skins and bells, and looks for all the world like a demon out of Grimm's fairy tales. Scares the pants off the little buggers with threats of disaster and calamity that only the Germans could invent. Children scream and cling to their mothers, but to no avail. Ruprecht yanks them away and even uses his switch on them. Then I show up to rescue the kiddies, deliver them safely to their mothers' arms, and hand out some goodies. Oh, I know, it's a cheap thrill for me. But at least they figure out that evil is scary, that wickedness is punished, and that divine rescue is pretty dramatic. Not bad for a myth.

But now? I've become the patron saint of greed, a patsy for the malls, where the closest thing to evil is having no-name sneakers or yesterday's favorite fragrance. No imagination in that. To be sure, even there I run into a kid every once in a while who is genuinely needy, and then all my original good intentions kick in—but I've become so conditioned to indulgence that I forget that to give a kid one toy is to brighten their spirit, but to give them a hundred is to kill it. And the adults are worse, of course. They think they actually deserve to be wealthy, so they conjure up economists and psychologists to assure themselves that greed is good and that whatever they owe they owe first to themselves. And that makes me their favorite saint. God help me, I've gotten fat—and I'm not talking about around the middle. I'm talking about my soul. I've become fluff, and there is no health in me.

The Brits screwed it up first, I think—same as they did for cooking. Coca Cola helped. You Yanks joined whole hog. December 6 didn't make sense any more. Too confining. 'Twas the night before Christmas when the spirit of Christmas stuff was needed. And then, increasingly, all the weeks and months in advance. So here I am, a cynical old joke, pretty much in his dotage, who has forgotten about the poor and who can't recognize real evil when he sees it. A wimpy little Pelagian: be good, get some favors; be bad, get some guilt—but not for long. Santa doesn't dare stay mad—not because grace abounds, but because Mattel and Nintendo wouldn't stand for it. If Santa won't deliver the goods, they'll find an elf who can. So I'm nothing if not malleable. I need the work. It's called bondage.

Once upon a time, I really liked some verses in Malachi. In fact, as far as I can recall, it may be where I got that notion about lumps of coal. Back when I still had some guts, I used to think of Malachi as something of a role model, the St. Nicholas of the prophets: be good, get the goodies; be bad, get the coal—or worse, the coals:

See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. (Mal 4:1–2)

Real retribution there, by God. And Malachi's accusations might just as well be directed at us: wholesale disregard of the commandments; cynical assurances that God loves everyone anyway; denial of divine justice; a religious establishment so caught up in the ways of power that it pays only lip service to God.

Let me tell you a secret. When Malachi starts describing the wicked and their fate, I start getting edgy. I don't know about you.

So, how do we open the windows to that sun of righteousness and all its healing warmth? God knows we need it, you and I. Maybe the reason we keep adding more artificial Christmas lights every year is that we've pretty well turned off the real thing. Real light burns. Neon and LCDs just glow—that's better.

So, how do I find healing? Malachi divided between the wicked and the righteous, but if I have learned anything at all it is that, even as a bona fide and rostered

saint, that fearful line cuts right through the middle of me. There is no healing without the burning. There is no leaping like calves without shoveling the crap out of our stalls. And I don't know if I am up for it. Only God can do it, I guess, but some days I wonder about him. Still, he keeps on promising that he will. The one who comes in the name of the Lord passes through the fire with me and for me, and by his stripes I am healed. Those healing wings give me flight.

One thing I got right as Santa Claus: God really does expect us to be good. But my ongoing lie has been that we could do it on our own. So I modulated good and evil into naughty and nice, until it really didn't matter. Now, from Malachi I am re-discovering the truth that God must do it in us. But, I suppose, my temptation is to modulate that, too. A little fix, a little shove, a little prodding—I could use that. But healing? Change? Burning? I'm not sure I want to go there, but I know that if I don't I will be left once again worthless to the poor and empty to the shallow.

God promises nothing less than to break my bondage to Christmas. I know, it's hard to believe. It's a big system, and so much of it seems sick unto death. But God heals. Christ promises to yank even me out of the arms of evil and give me back to my mother, ready for new life. Can I believe this? Only if I hear it daily, I think. God knows, I will never *have* transformation, just as I never *have* the gospel. They come to me. They happen to me. And I am healed.

So, pray with me for the coming of the sun of righteousness—that sun whose warmth and light make us new just as they make new our gardens every spring; yes, and that Son whose righteousness becomes our own. Might Christmas ever again be for me about something more than cash registers and credit cards? It seems impossible. But when Jesus enters with healing in his wings, all things become possible. Even if it takes some burning. The burning still scares me, but I sure don't like the consumaholism. So, God, free me from the bondage to Christmas stuff and everything that it implies. And while you're at it, work on my friends out there, too. I fear I've led them astray.

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*This editorial is based on a Luther Seminary chapel sermon from December 6, 1999.