

The Christmas redbird: A symbol of the life and death of Christ



We will see Christmas come soon, life will continue. So will its tensions, beginning with the anxiety, stress, fear and even sickness and death associated, at this moment, with the COVID-19 pandemic. Where do we go from here?

Even for the burdened and afflicted, Christmas is special. People will celebrate at home – maybe feasting on a TV dinner drawn from the freezer – but they remember the day, impossible, even in these secular times, to disconnect from the birth of Jesus. He is the answer, the strength and the cure for all that is wrong.

Merchandisers festooned their stores with Christmas decorations. One grocery store near my home offered Christmas dishes, napkins, towels and so on, alongside its offerings of facial masks and disinfectants. These Christmas articles featured the image of a redbird. A traditional Christmas symbol, the redbird has a beautiful message about Christmas.

This is interesting. Few of the Christmas symbols have anything to do with a newborn baby. Most of them refer to Good Friday. Red, the color of the Lord's precious blood, is the quintessential Christmas color, not baby blue for an infant boy. Holly is a cherished Christmas symbol, not hay from the manger.

Christmas remembers when the Son of God literally and personally came into our world. He became one of us. Emmanuel! God is with us! But Christ was born to reconcile sinners with God, culminating on Good Friday. We celebrate the Lord's

birth, rejoicing in what the Nativity set in motion, the salvation secured for us on Calvary 33 years after Bethlehem, and forever.

This is where the redbird enters the story. An old legend is that at the time of Jesus, a species of birds was quite plentiful in the Holy Land. It was too small to eat. It made no music. It was ugly, its plumage dull and bland. It was a pest, good for nothing. People shooed the birds away.

Jesus did not wave the birds away. Ugly as they were, unable to produce any melody whatsoever, providing not even meat for human consumption, they were despised, but the Lord saw in them God's creation, and God's creation was a testament not only to divine power but also to divine love. The birds were here for a purpose. The birds belonged to God.

Not surprisingly, free from danger, free from the sting of being unwanted, the birds followed Jesus, flying beside the Lord on the highways and byways of Galilee, on to Jerusalem. They followed Jesus to the sentencing bench of Pilate and then to Calvary. Everlasting in their loyalty, and trust, they landed beneath the Cross.

A drop of the Lord's precious blood fell on one of the birds, and instantly the entire species became the most beautiful of birds, its feathers magnificently, brilliantly red. From that day until now, the redbirds provide no song or food, but they give the most wonderful of gifts, calling all to confidence in the redeeming love of Christ, calming all fears, and assuring us that, whatever pains earthly life produces, life eternal is ahead.

At that grocery, I bought a set of towels for my kitchen. Even in the dreariness of the most routine, the images of the redbirds on the towels proclaims the magnificence of the Lord, in every circumstance of life.

Looking ahead to 2021, likely to more weeks of COVID, although

we pray for the fast delivery of the vaccine, the Christmas redbird reminds us to see everything and everyone with the eyes of Jesus. No one is ugly. No one is useless. The miraculous change in the bird's plumage recalls that the reward of trusting God comes even in the most troubling times, and that if we hold fast to Jesus, come what may, we, and life, can be beautiful.

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