

14th December 2020

Lights

**“I have often thought, says Sir Roger,
it happens very well that Christmas should fall in the Middle of Winter.”**

Joseph Addison, The Spectator, 1712

There's been an increase in recent years of houses that are "lit up like Blackpool illuminations" at Christmas. Maybe this year there's good reason. We've had such a hard time in 2020, why shouldn't we go "over the top" with our lightshows? It makes us feel good and gives other people pleasure – even though the displays *did* seem to start this year in early November! But we need those lights this year. Joseph Addison is right. Christmas falls very well indeed in the middle of winter.

But it wasn't always so. For the first three centuries of Christianity Jesus' birth wasn't celebrated *at all*. The significant festivals were Epiphany on January 6th, commemorating the arrival of the Magi after Jesus' birth, and Easter, celebrating the Resurrection. The first official mention of December 25th marking the birth of Jesus appears in a Roman calendar from 336 A.D. At the end of that century, the Church settled on December 25th, most likely to coincide with existing pagan festivals honouring Saturn (the Roman god of agriculture) and Mithra (the Persian god of light). That way, it became easier to convince Rome's pagan subjects to accept Christianity as the empire's official religion. Then the Puritans banned Christmas because they viewed its tradition – including gifts and decorations – as linked to such paganism. And now?

A friend sent me a photograph of Iona Abbey just before Christmas. In the piano loft, above the Choir of the church, there's a huge star, casting its light across the sanctuary and the marble Communion table, and into the South Aisle and Prayer Chapel – a light shining in the darkness.

"It happens very well that Christmas should fall in the Middle of Winter". It happens very well that we should fill our streets and Abbeys alike with colour and life. Because it happens very well that a Light comes to challenge the darkness of a troubled world.

A prayer for today

*"A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot put it out."
Let your light shine ... and give glory to God.*

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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