

Titus 3:4-7

Luke 2:1-7

The God in whom we are complete

Distracted

What we pay attention to matters so much in economic terms today that commentators speak of our now inhabiting an “attention economy”. We experience this in all its social, commercial and political dimensions through the notifications on our phones, the clamouring of influencers, and increasingly in-your-face advertising.

With this competition for our attention comes the corresponding experience of distraction. When something vibrates or “tings” nearby, we are distracted from whatever we are doing. If the distraction is well-designed, the interruption grips our attention. This is how we might be sucked into a vortex of binge-watching something into the wee hours, or have a study session cut into confetti-sized bits by group chatter, or find ourselves with a hefty fine because we’ve tried to answer a text while driving. So pervasive is this experience that some have suggested that *indistractability* is the most impressive superpower of the present age.

But what does it say about us that we *are* so distractable? Distraction works as a commercial and political method because there are “buttons” in us which can be pushed by noises or flashing lights which will cause us to look up from whatever we are doing. These buttons are being pushed, of course, because our responses translate into dollars or votes for the button pushers.

Incomplete

But my immediate interest is *that* we respond, because our response tells us something about the tension between the *real*, tangible value of what we might already be doing and our sense of the *possible* value of what the distraction promises. What’s common to these kinds of distractions is the positive possibility of an “*addition*” to ourselves, and the corresponding negative experience of *incompleteness*.

This is perhaps most obvious when counting the number of online friends, followers, views, votes, shares, or re-tweets: more is more, and more matters because it is “less incomplete”. But it’s much the same with other distractions: the distraction of the latest version of our now superseded thing or of the novel “experience” we might have the money to buy. The possibility of the new thing distracts us because we imagine we are not yet complete. Where I am now, what I am doing now, what I *am* – these don’t seem to be enough. *I* am not yet enough; there must be more, and it’s not *here* but perhaps it’s *there* – in the next notification, in a different life partner, a new job, or when I finally retire

Christmas and completeness

So, what has all this got to do with Christmas? Christmas is about completeness in the midst of, and in the very *form* of, incompleteness.

“...And [Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger...”

Luke's Christmas narrative is filled with signs of incompleteness. It speaks of the displacement of the holy family by the will of empire, of their marginalisation despite Mary's condition, and of the humiliation of being laid in a manger. There is not a lot of fullness in the circumstances of the birth of Jesus.

But born, wrapped securely, and laid down safely, the child is complete. Of course – as with most children – there are many things he will do and say, many things he will enjoy and suffer. But none of that will exceed the completeness he is in himself: he is already all he needs to be. The Christmas story is about a completeness in the midst of poverty and powerlessness – a wholeness despite want and need, the utter absence of the *need* for distraction.

We don't *believe* this, of course, which is why Christmas is often the opposite for us: a season of not enough, a season of incompleteness. And so we can be driven to distraction by the Christmas imperative to provide for the accumulation of more: more stuff for people who don't really need it, more money to pay for the stuff, more work to earn the money to pay for the stuff, and so on. This kind of incompleteness is not merely a condition but a process, a way of life.

By contrast, there is a completeness in the Christ child to which nothing needs to be added. Yet this is not sentimental gooeyness at the image of a newborn. And neither is it a nostalgic harking back to a lost era when things were simpler. These are both themselves distractions. Sentimentality distracts us from the whole truth by telling only what might be appealing, and so sees only the cradle and not the cross. Nostalgia distracts by denying a fundamental truth of history – that though our circumstances may change significantly, we ourselves do not. And so, nostalgia imagines that the story from the cradle to the cross is not really *our* story.

But that first Christmas was the beginning of a story of wholeness in full awareness of our deprivation, a vision of completeness despite absence. We could moralise this by saying that Jesus remained true despite his lowly beginning, the opposition to his ministry and the final injustice of his crucifixion. This is worth saying, but it also reduces Jesus to a mere hero. The problem is that we don't need heroes to do it for us; we need to be able *ourselves* to live complete lives in the midst of incompleteness. We need to be able to live lives which are not constantly haunted by the suspicion that there's a better life, a better option, just behind the next glittering, ringing, distracting thing. Because there really isn't.

Being enough

If Jesus does remain true from the cradle to the crucifixion, it is not by mere moral courage. It is by the conviction that he is complete wherever he is, whatever he is doing, whatever is happening to him. That is, Jesus knows his life to be a point at which God reigns in the world. It is this presence of God in what he does and experiences which is Jesus' completeness. And this is *despite* appearances. God reigns in the child in the manger, in the sweaty teacher on the dusty streets, in the argumentative troublemaker and in the despised figure on the cross.

To get Christmas right is not to reduce it to a small part of our incomplete lives but to see it as being about everything in *one* thing: the whole of God and ourselves in just one small child and what he was to become, and perhaps also in us.

The reign of God – the gift of God's self to the world, to our very selves – is not a distraction from what we are doing. It is the *revaluation* of what we are. You are not the sum of everything you have done, if this means there would be more of you if you did more, experienced more, viewed more, or sampled more. With the God of the cradle and the cross, you are enough *before* you begin doing or experiencing anything.

We lose this somewhere along the way, strangely becoming *less* as we do and own and experience *more*. The child in the manger will one day propose that unless we become again as children, we cannot be whole, cannot know God's kingdom, cannot know that time and space in which whatever belongs to us, we belong to God (Matthew 18.2-5).

Indistractability is about this gift of completeness – trusting that even though there are many things we can do and we can add to ourselves, it is enough that we have been born, and swaddled, and laid in the manger of the world.

Because with *this* God, You. Are. Enough, however incomplete you think you are, however tempting it is to want to be more.

Rest, then, under the loving gaze of God, as did Jesus once under Mary's eyes of love, and know yourselves to be complete.
