

Two Trees in One

The church looks especially nice decorated for Christmas – the advent wreath with candles, lots of poinsettias, and of course a tree with dozens of little white lights. Now, ours is artificial, but longer ago, churches used real Christmas trees, some quite tall to take advantage of vaulted ceilings. Then often, when the season was over, the tree would be stripped of its decorations and its branches too. The trunk would be saved, though, and refashioned into a rustic cross to be used during lent the following spring.

When you picture it, these ‘before’ and ‘after’ trees present quite a stark contrast – a thing of sublime beauty that we love to gaze upon, now stripped of all its glory and reduced to something humble, bare, even ugly. Sad, but very appropriate, because isn’t that exactly what Jesus did for us that first Christmas? The King of Kings laid aside all his heavenly glory and majesty – splendor such as we can’t even image – to be clothed instead in the humblest human form, a helpless baby.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness... He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

Because He loved us, the divine Son of God allowed Himself to be stripped, beaten, and crucified for our sins. But instead of gazing with adoration, we avert our eyes and thoughts from that repellant image.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces. (Isaiah 53:2-3)

Most would probably prefer to enjoy Christmas without thinking about the cross – to focus on sweet Baby Jesus, the shining star, angels singing, the shepherds rejoicing – and yet the two are inextricably bound together. There would be no Christmas if Jesus hadn’t been willing to face the cross. That is why He came (John 12:27), which should actually magnify a thousand fold our appreciation for the events of that first Christmas! So, yes, rejoice and revel in the miracle, beauty, and wonder of the season! And every time you see a lovely Christmas tree, remember the love expressed on that other tree too.

S. Johnson