

The crib goes beyond faith and should stay

NO matter where Irish people stand on the ideological spectrum, few will deny that our culture is informed by Christian values. Ireland may have repudiated much of its Catholic past, but to suggest that this is now a completely secular culture, where every vestige of our heritage should be renounced, is nothing but a new dogmatism. That is why, even amid the commercial bonanza, so many of us still cling to the Christmas story.

Indeed, what is Christmas without that heart-warming story, which is symbolised so powerfully by the crib? It is the story of a young mother who takes refuge in a stable to give birth to a child who will 'set captives free'. You don't have to be religious to appreciate the deep symbolism of the Christmas crib, and how it touches young and old alike.

It is, therefore, incomprehensible that management at one of Ireland's leading hospitals is demanding that cribs be removed from foyers and wards. Despite a petition 'to save the crib', a spokesperson for Beaumont Hospital in Dublin insisted that cribs must go because 'the wider hospital community is multi-cultural and therefore multi-faith'.

While that may be so, isn't it also true that many staff and patients at the hospital are Christian or have a Christian background? However, irrespective of people's religious beliefs, who could be offended by a crib? The Humanist Society of Ireland responded by saying that 'we shouldn't be too precious by these things'. Quite so, for to ban the crib is to prohibit something that is loved by people of all faiths and none.

Tomorrow night, families of all backgrounds and beliefs will begin Christmas by gathering around the crib. They will do so because it is a central icon of our identity and a universal symbol of consolation.

If they wish it, no Irish person should be denied that consolation – least of all those who must celebrate Christmas in hospital.

Salute our UN troops

CELEBRATING Christmas here at home with our families is, for many, the highlight of our year. However, we must remember that many Irish families will spend this Christmas mourning lost loved ones. Yesterday, by travelling to Lebanon to lay a wreath for fallen Irish soldiers, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar reminded us of the great debt we owe to those who laid down their lives so that others might live in peace.

The Taoiseach's visit also sought to give a morale boost to the 343 Irish soldiers on duty in Lebanon over the Christmas period. That is 343 Irish families who will be separated from someone special during the festive season. One Irish soldier poignantly remarked that he is 'missing his son's first Christmas'.

We often forget the great sacrifices endured by our armed forces in pursuit of a better world. As they celebrate this Christmas far from home, we salute their courage and commitment to our country and to those values which unite us all.

A time for family

AS we pay tribute to our soldiers serving abroad, let us rejoice that so many families were reunited with their loved ones who finally made it home for Christmas.

Yesterday's emotional scenes at Dublin Airport, where relatives and friends fell tearfully into each other's arms, was not only moving and heart-warming. It proves yet again just how deep-rooted Christmas is in the Irish psyche.

No matter where we are in the world, we all long to return home to celebrate Christmas with our families.

And so, as we prepare to do that now, we would like to wish all our readers a peaceful, safe and happy Christmas.

They say it is the most magical time of the year, a season of wonder, joy and goodwill. And yet, what is left of Christmas when the commercial wheel stops spinning? What is left of this great feast after all the hustle and bustle, the frantic buying and selling?

You know what I mean: the relentless queues, traffic chaos, the stress, anxiety and exhaustion. The shopping trolleys bulging with too much food, the panicky pursuit of presents that cost too much, and the niggling worry that you may have forgotten something. And then, when the big day arrives, you are too agitated and exhausted to enjoy it.

It is certainly true that Christmas brings its own unique levels of anxiety. But this belies the fact that, beyond the commercial frenzy, Christmas still retains its capacity to bind people like no other event in the long calendar year. It still manages to draw us back to the homeland of the heart.

The pressure and the panic will continue until last light on Christmas Eve. Even then, the domestic preparations will still be in full swing. But this will be a different class of pressure: it will be work that delivers its own joyful reward.

Night will fall, and the bells will toll. The shutters will come down on the commercial world and, for a brief time, we will all turn inwards. The Christmas lights that defy the winter gloom will guide us home.

No matter how detached we have become from hearth and home, we all long to return – if only for a few days. Christmas gives us our reason to revisit those times and places from which our fondest memories were formed. It draws us back to family, friends and fireside.

Our stressed-out society is characterised by constant commuting in the fast lane. We rush here, there and everywhere with 'no direction home'. We are neither bound nor rooted to anything for too long.

In returning home on Christmas Eve, we experience what it means to belong. It is as though life has suddenly switched to the slow lane, as if time has taken a backward step. We are drawn into an old way of being that satisfies the senses and sates the soul.

There is nothing fast about that 'night divine' or the lazy days that follow. Fast food gives way to slow cooking. As the rush subsides, people find time to chat, laugh and lounge with each other for its own sake.

Christmas is all about preparing a feast that will last for days. From the four corners, the family gathers to eat and make merry. In so doing, they are once again rooted to a place where all that truly matters is there to be savoured and enjoyed.

Home is where the heart is when it comes to Christmas

The true meaning of this season is in the welcome embrace of family, where we can unwind, take stock and replenish

SATURDAY
ESSAY



by Dr Mark
Dooley

How often do we cook, bake and lovingly prepare food in our fast-paced world? If alienation and detachment are characteristic of who we now are, it is because we have largely abandoned these timeless arts. To lose them, however, is to lose that sense of rootedness that, deep down, we all yearn for.

Turkey and ham, mince pies and mulled wine, pudding and pavlova – these are all much more than traditional Christmas fare. They root us once more to our past, to creation

and to each other. We take the gifts of the earth, prepare them with tender care and, very often, according to recipes handed down by our dear departed.

My grandmother used to prepare her pudding in late October. She would take a large cauldron and, with my assistance, mix together ingredients that would feed three families. It was my first lesson in the art of Christmas cooking and I have never forgotten it.

Today, my aunt continues to prepare the puddings accord-

ing to my grandmother's old recipe. For me, it is a symbol of bygone times, an icon of something gone but never forgotten. That pudding roots me to a past that still touches me deeply, to times that form the basis of my most cherished memories.

So, too, with many Irish people: the pudding, the scent of the sizzling turkey and the sweet aroma of honey-glazed ham, remind us that we belong to something much more than ourselves. Our families are comprised not only of the living, but also of those who have gone before. And it is thanks to them, people who never failed to keep Christmas well, that we can now enjoy this hallowed experience of home.

The fire is ablaze, the candles glow and the pots simmer on the stove. We gather, pour a



Hindsight: This is a time of looking to Christmases past and savouring memories

glass and sit around the hearth. We chat about everything and anything, recalling good times and bad in a spirit of gentle joy.

In our age, it takes a lot to plug out and simply sit, sip and converse. It takes a lot to play with the children, read stories and, sometimes, even sing together. What was once the norm for every family in the land, has become such a rare experience.

But there is nothing virtual about Christmas. As the last strains of Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree fade for yet another year, we turn away from the shops and the streets to be with the people and things that give meaning to our lives. Christmas forces us to engage with life in a way that transcends the times in which we live.

To break bread together as a family is a sacred communion. In eating of the one meal, we, too, become one. It is a ceremony that

endorses our history, our togetherness and our enduring love. We pull the crackers, raise a toast to the 'founder of the feast', and then tuck in as we once did when the years were young and time seemed no obstacle to our aspirations. We notice the empty places at the table, silent symbols of time's relentless march. We recall those Christmases when life seemed more certain. In such moments, we may even shed a tear, but they are real things too.

As the little ones enjoy Santa's bounty, we gaze back but we also look forward. Christmas asks questions of our lives, helps to put things in perspective, and gives us that sense of peace which is so precious in a world of incessant noise. Surrounded by those we love, those who make us feel at home, we can take stock before resuming the race.

At Christmas, we discover again

who we are and where we come from. We all long to belong and to find our place in the world. We all long to put down roots and stay put for more than a fleeting moment.

THAT is why, in those sleepy days between Christmas and New Year, we revive the lost pleasures of reading and resting, of meeting and hosting friends. One meal leads to the next as we open our doors in a gesture of seasonal hospitality. We share and serve so that others may also feel at home.

In so many ways, Christmas stitches back together the frayed fabric of our lives. In reconnecting with family, friends, neighbours and the ghosts of Christmas past, our identity is somewhat restored. We reconcile with our roots in a

spirit of tender acceptance.

Of course, there may also be the odd family row, and, invariably, it is never too long before some old grievances float to the surface. But they, too, are all part of coming home, of venting with those who accept you for the person that you are. We feast, we laugh, we play, and we have the occasional row, because that is the nature of real life and what family would have Christmas any other way?

To be yourself, at home with those you love, is the essence of this sacred season. But so, too, are the calm hours spent poring over a novel, nibbling on the leftovers from the night before. And then, as the evening shadows creep across the room, we light the fire and settle down to a Yuletide special of a Dickens classic. It may be A Christmas Carol, The Old Curiosity Shop, or even the millionth screening of Oliver Twist. It doesn't matter,

because what we are searching for is there in all of Dickens's stories. It is that sense of something old and dusty, something that will transport us to quieter times when the world seemed to spin less frantically.

Soon, the mayhem will cease, and the streets will be forsaken for the fireside. The annual ritual that we call Christmas will then begin - a ritual that reminds us of the things that make human life so worthwhile. It is a ritual that forces us to remember that true joy is found far from the madding crowd.

This explains why, for one night only, our churches are packed to capacity. Believers join with sceptics, agnostics and atheists to give thanks for what we have and who we are. In ceremony and song, we endorse our common heritage, our common home.

What other season of the year could bind families, friends, and even strangers, so closely together? What other season has the power to heal old wounds, to reconcile enemies and conquer our divisions? It lasts for the briefest time, and yet it still manages to pull us back from the brink, still manages to give us that gift of peace so sought after in our weary world.

MANY years ago, I knew a woman who was dying of cancer. In her last agony, her only wish was to make it to Christmas. Her children were still relatively young, and she desperately wanted to be there among them one last time. She made it. On Christmas Day, she struggled from her bed to eat with her beloved family. One more set of magical memories, one more day around the tree in joyful thanksgiving.

Isn't it this which constitutes the real magic of Christmas? People doing extraordinary things just to make it home. People struggling against all the odds to sit, eat and make merry with those they love. Parents stretching themselves to the limits so that their little ones will have a treasury of memories that will last a lifetime.

Magic is a much-misused word. But surely there is something truly magical in the fact that, for one week of the year, we stop, turn for home and simply enjoy special moments gift-wrapped in love. In rediscovering this magic, we experience the true beauty of Christmas, its true claim on the human heart. Beyond all the glitz and glamour, the shopping and the stress, there is that invitation to return to what matters and, in so doing, to be made whole again.

Somewhere, there is an open door, a roast in the oven, a fire blazing and a glass with your name on it.

Somewhere, there are memories to be made with little children who never doubt the magic of Christmas. There is laughter to be had, friends to revisit and good books to be read. And even where there are tears to be shed, they will always be followed by a healing hug.

Somewhere, the ghosts of Christmas past sit waiting to be remembered. And that is magical too, for only at Christmas can those whom we have loved and lost be found back where they belong.

Somewhere, as the stars shine on that night divine, there is always someone longing to say: 'Welcome home'.