

# Voices: Thinking through Christmas in occupied France

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For the past week or so, I've been reading Philip Hallie's excellent book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, for one of my courses at Truett Seminary.

Hallie's book is a biography of mid 20th-century French pastor André Trocmé, who led his congregation in the Nazi-occupied city of Le Chambon to provide shelter for as many as 5,000 Jewish refugees between 1938 and 1945.

What causes an entire congregation to risk their lives for complete strangers? What inspired the bravery of Trocmé and the people of Le Chambon, bravery that allowed for continuous resistance to the Nazi Party in spite of tremendous pressure and personal risk?

The answer, appropriately enough, turns out to be Christmas.

## 'If Jesus really walked upon the Earth'

I say "Christmas" because Trocmé was impacted deeply by the idea of the Incarnation, that the Son of God became physically, tangibly and bodily manifest among us that night in Bethlehem.

"If Jesus really walked upon the earth," wrote Trocmé, "why do we keep treating him as if he were a disembodied, impossibly idealistic ethical theory? If he was a real man, then the Sermon on the Mount was made for people on this earth; and if he existed, God has shown us what goodness is for flesh-and-blood people."

This line, written by Trocmé in his journal during his seminary years, stood

out to me.

Many seem to reduce Jesus to an abstract idea, to a kind of myth existing solely to support things believed by whatever segment of culture matters to them.

“What would Jesus do?” often means, at best, “What’s the nicest thing to do in this situation?” or, at worst, “What would I do in this situation?”

In other words, we often ask, “What would Jesus do?” when, as this season reminds us, we should be asking, “What *did* Jesus do?”

## **What *did* Jesus do?**

For Trocmé, the question, “What did Jesus do?” had an immediate tangible, identifiable and even life-endangering answer. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, walked the earth as a real person with a real body.

If God himself walked the earth as a human person, how could Trocmé allow human persons to be destroyed?

The Incarnation, God’s becoming a human to save humans, inspired Trocmé and his congregation to risk their lives for strangers fleeing from a desperate situation.

I fear we forget too often how radically the Incarnation challenges our status quos and spurs us on to actions we wouldn’t otherwise take. We assume the answer to “What would Jesus do?” is the same as “what I would do,” elevating ourselves to god-likeness and refusing to be transformed like Trocmé and the people of Le Chambon were.

# 'A violent man conquered by God'

Trocme described himself as “a violent man conquered by God,” an ironic description for a man who would spend the latter part of his life touring the world lecturing on Christian non-violence.

In calling himself “a violent man conquered by God,” Trocme meant that his nature was completely overturned and determined by his encounter with Christ.

The Christ Trocme discovered was not a disembodied idea encouraging good behavior. The Christ Trocme discovered was a flesh-and-blood person as real as anybody who has ever existed.

It was this realization about the weight of Christmas—that not only is God present, not only is Christ God, but *God lived in our midst in real time*—that caused Trocme to realize no part of his life, no thought or action, could ever occur without taking this fact into consideration.

## What Christmas means for us

The witness of Trocme and the people of Le Chambon, France, makes me think about the areas of my own life that are not yet conquered by the God who took on flesh and dwelt among us.

We have a habit of finding barriers to protect us from being conquered by Christ, such as common sense, which tells us we cannot take Christ's words about caring for our enemies seriously in our own lives.

Commitments to abstract ideas about what Christ stood for—Christ is loving, and loving means “x”—keep us from taking Christ's harsh words about self-discipline and discipleship seriously.

In both cases, the reality of Christ is brushed aside for the sake of safety and convenience.

Christmas reminds us the reality of Christ is not an option—that Christ is not an idea for us to shape and form, but a person as real as you and me.

This season, as we think about God becoming human, let us think about what the sheer fact of Christ's existence means for us.

Maybe it means something as dramatic as sheltering 5,000 people fleeing for their lives.

Maybe it means something more personal and less dramatic in our context.

Either way, thanks and obedience be to the God who walks among us.

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