Only a flaky Christian would get annoyed by Greggs’ sausage roll Jesus

Peter Ormerod

The bakery put a sausage roll in the manger in one of its ads – and prompted the kind of misguided, humourless reaction that gives us Christians a bad name

It’s an outrage, I tell you. How could something so sacred be corrupted into something so profane? How could God be so insulted that He is presented in so pitiful a form? It’s appallingly disrespectful. It makes a mockery of so much we hold dear. It’s sacrilegious. Blasphemous. Offensive.

Yes, the story of the nativity is quite a scandal – the almighty creator of the universe appearing on Earth mewling and wailing in a trough in a shed shared with some farm animals. Glory, splendour, majesty? Yeah, right.

Yet despite being reminded of this intense absurdity every year, some of us Christians still find something supposedly scandalous to get irate about each time Christmas comes around. If it’s not fake news about wintervals and prayers, it’s tales of the violation of the festival by commercial interests. And this dishonourable tradition shows no sign of dying out, for this year we have the sausage roll in place of Jesus in order to flog some greasy bakery products. He’s not the Messiah – he’s some limp pastry filled with processed meat.

The Evangelical Alliance has accused Greggs, the company behind said image, of “manufacturing a scandal”. But this is the sort of scandal that exists only if people want to be scandalised. And all too predictably, they do. It’s as if we Christians can’t get through any Christmas without making ourselves look ridiculous (or rather, even more ridiculous than usual). So much unnecessary hostility could be avoided if we just took a step back and paused for thought sometimes. And there are a few things about even this particular phony mess that are worth thinking about.

The first is that the image is funny. Yes, we need to face facts: the idea of Jesus being replaced by a sausage roll is funny. It’s funny because sausage rolls possess inherent comic value, but also because it’s absurd. And it’s only absurd because the story of the nativity, even after 2,000 years, still holds a strange and quite remarkable power over our imaginations, as does Jesus as a person or idea. The fact that it’s funny tells us just how potent some of these key aspects of Christian iconography remain. A picture in which a sausage roll replaced, say, Lady Gaga, wouldn’t have nearly the same effect.

The second is that anyone who claims to take Jesus seriously should really be finding literally hundreds of other things to get outraged about instead. There’s child poverty; there’s the rise in food bank use; there’s climate change; there’s the surge in hate crime; there’s profound inequality; there’s warmongering; there’s slavery. Second-guessing what Jesus would do in any particular circumstance is a fool’s game – according to the gospels, he rather enjoyed challenging people’s expectations of him – but I’m going to do so anyway and suggest that he would have been rather more bothered about the plight of poor people than by the depiction of him in a representation of a scene that fails even to merit a mention in two of the gospels.

Part of the reason these stories return every year is that some Christians relish the idea that they are being persecuted. We’re being singled out, they say. Islam would never be mocked in the same way, they say. To which I say: it’s a funny form of persecution when the Church of England is part of our political system; when its supreme governor is the Queen; and when one of its followers is the prime minister.

Unlike followers of Islam and Judaism, we are not routinely demonised as terrorist sympathisers or as part of a sinister global conspiracy of money and power. My beliefs may be mocked – and rightly so – but I’m unlikely to be spat at in the street because of them.