

# Along the track

## Xmas or Christmas?

Are you looking forward to Christmas? How will you celebrate Christmas this year?

I read an article recently written by an atheist, one who believes that Christmas has become part of our general culture – it is just as secular as it is religious. He believes that religion has proved itself divisive and destructive time and again. And yet, he loves Christmas and refuses to enter a shop which substitutes ‘X’ for ‘Christ’ in ‘Xmas’.

*Christmas belongs to all of us, he wrote, as a point in the calendar when kindness is expected... and despite the horrors of bad taste and over-indulgence associated with it, it gives old people watching daytime shopping channels something to look forward to, children confused by a world of tawdry false priorities some sense of a larger universe, and parents something that will keep their children at home and close to them if only for one day a year. In sum, something they can hold onto in a world that otherwise simply doesn't make sense. And like all the big stories found in every culture across the globe, it's about children and our responsibility to them, and how by recognising that, we stand a chance of being redeemed.*

Sometimes we can become annoyed, even shocked at how our so called secular society adopts religious feasts, how they commercialise them, even gives them another meaning. We can even get used to the rather patronising justifications – ‘well, it's for the children really’. We can tut, tut about it, but how complicit are we in that commercialisation, that trivialising? Do we let it happen? Even more, do we, however unwittingly, support the process?

When we celebrate Christmas this year, will there be lots of good things to eat, more than usual perhaps? We go out and buy up lots and lots for this one-day-of-the-year celebration. Nothing wrong with that is there? Well, that's probably nothing special for most of us. We eat well every day. Do we spare a thought or do something practical for the many millions in our world who are starving this Christmas. The meals we have every day would be “Christmas” for them.

Christmas cards? Are they a thing of the past or do we still keep in touch over Christmas – with friends, family, colleagues, those we have not seen from one year's end to the next? Do we send off cards and feel a bit resentful if we don't get a response? What kind of cards do we send – ones with a genuine Christmas message or ones with an “X”?

Is Christmas a time for lots of presents? Nothing wrong with that, is there? Children love the presents and, if truth be known, so do we. Even presents we can't afford or want! Christmas is for the children, after all, we say. Sometimes we go for the expensive presents as an indication of how much we love them. But what of those who will get nothing this year – no-one to give them a

present or those who would like to but just cannot afford it. Do we spare or thought for those who will get nothing this year, those who have nothing, who may have left all behind when they fled their country or those who have joined the growing list of unemployed in our country. Not just a thought – something more practical perhaps?

Family get-togethers can be wonderful – Christmas brings people together. It can be one of the great blessings of this season. Then there are the many who live alone and feel that everyone is having a wonderful time and they are left out. Loneliness is a terrible curse.

Christmas as it finds expression in our homes and families can be a season of celebration, of joy and community. How will our faith find expression in how we approach Christmas this year, in our celebrations, in our gatherings, in how we recall the events which are the origin of this day? How do we celebrate its real meaning, that Christmas is essentially a religious celebration. We are celebrating the time when Jesus became one of us, that God loved the world so much that God became one of us in Jesus. How will we put Christ into our Christmas this year?

Will there be a crib in our home? Will we re-tell the story of Christmas in some way? Will we gather in prayer? Will we reach out as a family to those who like Jesus at his birth was homeless and poor? Away from the support of his extended family, soon to become a refugee in another country, fleeing in danger of his life. Will we gather with others in our church communities, to pray, to worship, to remember, to rejoice?

There is nothing wrong with enjoying Christmas – it would be sad if we did not! But what matters is that we remember *why* we are enjoying it. We are recalling a past event which transformed our world forever. Because of Christmas we look forward to a future of hope and the peace which Christ alone can bring. We celebrate Christmas to deepen our longing for God's kingdom to come, which we pray for daily. It exists so that we might remember Christ's birth, to accept him as our own, to find him in those around us, to work for his coming into our homes and workplaces, our neighbourhoods and into the society in which we live. It means asking ourselves what might God be wanting from us at this time?

Perhaps Christmas may have been hijacked by the general culture, by the powerful commercial interests. On the positive side, that means a lot of people hear about Christmas and, in some small way, celebrate it. Christmas isn't only for the children. All of us celebrate the coming of Jesus into our world, we celebrate Emmanuel, that God is with us, today and everyday.

Regards  
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