

Along the track

We Need Christmas

For many of us, it may seem to get harder each year to gear up for another Christmas. The pressures of commercialisation, the rush to get everything done, coping with family pressures and tensions at times can make it difficult to capture the mood of Christmas.

Perhaps it may not be the same as it was in our childhood when we were excited about the tree, the lights, Christmas carols, decorations, gifts and special food, but there is still something life-giving in every Christmas, something that awakens memories and hopes, joys, the experience of community and just plain, good old happiness.

Christmas celebrates Christ's birth into our world and into our lives not just 2,000 or so years ago but this year too. Christmas also offers a chance of renewal, a chance to refocus and give thanks.

We need to celebrate Christmas 2018. We live in difficult times. The world is uneasy. Where is peace and good will in our polarised world today? The world is not quite at war but violence and cruelty are commonplace. Like this family who were forced to escape to Egypt, we live in a world where millions have fled homelands and are displaced. And not many seem to care all that much. We've got enough on our own plate without thinking about all that.

We have our own personal tragedies: the death of loved ones perhaps, lost jobs, fragile relationships, failing health, tiredness, anger, frustration, overwork, the battle to make ends meet. In the words of Fr Ronald Rolheiser: *How do we celebrate the birth of a redeemer in a world which looks shockingly unredeemed and with hearts that mostly feel heavy and fatigued? The Christmas story is not easily made credible.*

It is hard to make this story credible. For those who profess faith, for those who follow a religious tradition, we are now called on to defend that commitment in an increasingly secular society. 'How can you believe all that fantasy?' we are asked. How can you defend religion in the aftermath of the sexual abuse tragedy, many ask. Is it easier to put aside the real message of Christmas and just adopt the tinsel and commercialisation? Is it easier to give way when

children in some places are not allowed to sing carols or councils don't hang decorations in case it offends, when Christ gets replaced with an X?

Christmas is a reminder that Jesus became one of us, in all our frailty and vulnerability, our sickness, suffering, sadness, our jealousies and anger. He became one with our fear, uncertainties, anxieties and worries. He became one with our desire to be generous, to be loving, committed and compassionate, commitment – in other words, He became one with what is best in us too.

Jesus did not remove them. They are part of being human. But he brought a message of hope and renewal, a chance to reflect on what is important, on what really brings us life, peace and fulfilment. Jesus did not come to abolish all those things which make us human but to help us transform them, to redeem them.

Christmas is a reminder that Jesus comes into our lives today, just as he did all those years ago. He offers the same invitations to life as He did all those years ago. He offers the same invitations to renewal, the same invitation to believe, to commit, to love and serve because it is by accepting those challenges we find life.

Celebrating Jesus' birth in 2018 is not about denying or trivialising the real evil in our world but rather accepting His invitation to do what we can about it. We celebrate Christ's birth in 2018 not to deny the real stresses and pain in our lives but to accept His invitation to work at redeeming them.

We need Christmas not, in the words of Karl Marx as some 'opium,' to make the harshness of life more bearable but a reminder that in all the messiness of our lives, God is with us in our joys and disappointments as well as in our shortcomings, in our successes and failures, in our hopes and dreams. Christmas challenges us to celebrate *Emmanuel* (God-with-us) in the good times and in the bad.

It is too easy to forget that.

Regards
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