

The Real Meaning of Christmas

Don't you just get sick of people trying to tell you what the real meaning of Christmas is all about – especially when those people have nothing to do with Jesus and the Bible and what God was doing in the birth of Jesus?

For example, we have ads on TV about the KMart Wishing Tree. As I understand it, the idea is you buy a gift for a child and leave it under the tree with a tag that says whether it's for a boy or a girl and the age of the child for which the gift's suitable. KMart then organises for those gifts left under the tree to be distributed to children who wouldn't otherwise get much for Christmas. The real meaning of Christmas is about giving to those less fortunate. I think the ads are not as blatant as they once were, but the underlying message remains the same.

Now, I must confess I get a bit cynical when I hear a retailer trying to tell me the real meaning of Christmas. I just have this suspicion there may be a little bit of self-interest involved. When it comes to the KMart Wishing Tree, I have this sneaking suspicion that perhaps the bottom line isn't so much about giving to poor children as it is about spending more money in KMart so their bottom line looks a bit better for their shareholders. The more I give to the needy, the more I buy from their store. The more I buy from their store, the more money they make.

They're not the only ones whose advertising suggests this. The Salvation Army slogan this year is: Christmas is empty when you have nothing. St Vincent de Paul encourages us to "Complete this Christmas" by giving to

others. I don't remember seeing World Vision ads this year – but they and other child-sponsoring organisations have promoted similar ideas in previous years. They tell us our small gift can make a difference. We can change the lives of these children. They suggest the real meaning of Christmas is about giving to those less fortunate.

Others will tell you the real meaning of Christmas is all about world peace. That's usually the theme dominating the Christmas message of most world leaders. They refer to the various trouble spots in the world.

- The war in Iraq.
- The refugees from Sudan.
- The soldiers in Afghanistan.
- The civil wars in Africa.

They remind us that Christmas is a time of goodwill. It's a time to get on with one another. If they're game in this age of political correctness, they may even mention in passing something about some angels referring to peace. They'll express the hope that something can be done to ease the tensions in these world trouble spots. They'll talk about the necessity for leaders to enter into meaningful negotiations. They'll make a commitment to continue to work for peace in the coming year. Isn't that what Christmas is really all about?

Earlier this month, the Sydney Morning Herald ran an article on Christmas work parties. They interviewed representatives from different religions: Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem – even Atheist. They had five points to help you celebrate in style, not shame.

- If you must, call it the "end-of-year celebration".
- Have vegetarian options.
- Provide good-quality alternatives to alcohol and

move serious drinkers to another area to party on.

- If you must send cards, make them generic, such as "season's greetings", or give the postage money to charity instead.
- Decorate with tinsel, stars and trees but perhaps not a nativity scene.

For many, the real meaning of Christmas is about having a proper party. Get the decorations right. Get everyone in a festive mood. It's a great holiday. Let's celebrate as best we can. Forget about the credit card hangover we'll have when it's all finished. One of the interviewees said:

Christmas parties are a way of life in Australia – it's a cultural festival.

Another one said:

Christmas is the country's main celebration, so when in Rome, do as the Romans do.

We just have to make sure we do it in a way that shows tolerance to all those who want to celebrate Christmas without getting into all the Christian symbolism. We need to learn that Christmas can accommodate people of different religions and different understandings.

WIN TV has run a series of promos where their various "stars" tell you what Christmas means for them. It's to do with family, friends and food. It's staying at home instead of going out fishing. Jesus doesn't get a look in.

So what is the real meaning of Christmas?

- Is it giving?
- Is it world peace? Or regional peace?
- Is it simply party-time?
- It is tolerance?
- Is it family?

Perhaps Christmas is a flexible thing. Perhaps Christmas

can mean different things to different people – the real meaning of Christmas is peace to one person and party-time to another. Perhaps Christmas can mean whatever you want it to mean. Perhaps it's like a lump of plasticine you mould into whatever shape you like. But then, doesn't that mean that ultimately there's no real meaning? That the only meaning is whatever I feel like giving it at the time – and if you feel like giving it another meaning to me, that's OK. It all sounds very postmodern.

Could it be we're in danger of losing Christmas – not in terms of losing the holiday (that's never likely to happen in our materialistic and long-weekend society), but in terms of losing the underlying basis for the holiday. We've become a multinational and multicultural and multi-religious society. We work at learning how to live together as one big happy family. We want to accommodate people with a wide range of differences. One of the big words for us is tolerance. That applies in all areas of our lives – including Christmas.

- And so, we've had people who want to ban nativity plays from schools in case other religious groups are offended by such overt references to the Christian religion.
- We've had people who want to ban all mention of Jesus from the Christmas traditions at preschools in an effort to be inclusive towards other cultures.
- We've got a generation of children who can sing all the words to Jingle Bells and Rudolph the Red Nosed-Reindeer, but have trouble recognising the tunes of traditional Christmas carols.
- We've got people who want to take anything overtly Christian off the banners and decorations in our cities and want to remove traditional Christmas

scenes from our shopping centres.

We still want to have Christmas. We want the presents. We want the party. We want the holiday. We want to spend all the money. But we want the whole thing to be something neutral – something that's acceptable to people of all cultures and all religions. We want people to immigrate to our country and not be offended by our traditions – and so we redefine the traditions so they no longer mean what they used to.

Five years ago, the *Lake Macquarie News* reported Bishop Michael Malone being concerned about what's happening.

Debate seems to be gaining momentum about the appropriateness of Christian symbols and language in public places. This has grown out of an effort to be politically correct and sensitive to other faiths and belief systems. While these efforts are admirable, are we catering to the lowest common denominator, producing a characterless, colourless and bland society?

Bishop Malone said it's ironic that some commentators believed it was acceptable to have tinsel and glitter, Santa and Rudolph, food and presents, snow and holly, but not the presence of Jesus.¹ Is the writing on the wall? Will it only be a matter of years before the only place you can hear about Jesus at Christmas is in church? Will even that be left to us? Will they want the church to become politically correct as well?

There's much there to ponder – and it's an area that's worth pondering. As Christians, what should we do about this hijacking of our celebration? Is it OK that our

¹ *Lake Macquarie News*, December 22, 2004, 9.

society turns it into something that's more meaningful for where our society's at? Should we simply turn the other cheek? Should we applaud their honesty in trying to move away from their so-called Christian roots? Is it good they're trying not to be hypocritical? Or should we become pro-active in trying to regain the significance of this time?

As part of that, let me ask another question. I asked before: Could it be that we're in danger of losing Christmas? Now I ask: Could it be we've already lost Christmas? Could it be we turned it into something different a long time ago? That same newspaper article goes on to say this:

Bishop Malone said Christmas was not just for Christians. "Christmas challenges us to be accepting and open to different possibilities," he said. In our current society surely this is a hope-filled message that can bring about peace, love and harmony.²

Now, I don't want to be too hard on Bishop Malone on the basis of a brief report in a newspaper article that probably hasn't reported all he said and may even have got the bits it has reported not totally right. Yet, by itself, it seems to me those three sentences have already lost the heart of Christmas.

Let me come at it a different way – one which runs the risk of implicating ourselves.

- When we see the ads on television saying the real meaning of Christmas is about giving to those less fortunate, how do we react?
- When we hear the world leaders saying Christmas is all about peace, what do we think?

² *Lake Macquarie News*, December 22, 2004, 9.

Don't we have a tendency to agree with what they say? After all, there's a certain amount of truth in their words.

- At Christmas, we think about the great gift God gave us in Jesus. That gift is at the very heart of what Christmas is all about. Surely it's OK to say the real meaning of Christmas is giving.

- And didn't the company of angels say (Luke 2:14):
*Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom His
favour rests.*

Did the angels get it wrong? Is Christmas not about peace after all?

There is some truth there – but it's not the whole truth.

Christmas isn't about the abstract principle of giving. There's nothing wrong with giving to others. Especially, there's nothing wrong with giving to others less fortunate than yourself. The Bible encourages Christians to give to others. By all means, put gifts under the KMart Wishing Tree. Sponsor World Vision children. Buy a goat for a family in Nepal as a Christmas present for the person who has everything. Yet, recognise that Christmas isn't about the abstract principle of giving. It's about the specific gift God gave us. It's a significant difference.

- If on Christmas Day I exchange gifts with 100 different people and don't think once about Jesus, have I really understood what Christmas is about?
- If on Christmas Day I give gifts to 100 different people without getting any presents myself and don't think once about Jesus, have I really understood what Christmas is about?
- If on Christmas Day I think about the gift God gave me in Jesus and I don't give any gifts to other people, have I understood what Christmas is about?

What's the proper celebration of God's gift to us? Is the best way to celebrate that for me to give you a packet of handkerchiefs? Is it better if I give you a new TV or a new car? The Biblical way to celebrate God's gift to us is to preach the gospel – the good news of what God's done. It's the very specific gift of Jesus – who He is and what He did – that's the real meaning of Christmas.

Likewise, Christmas isn't about the abstract principle of peace – not even world peace. Again, there's nothing wrong with peace. It's good for nation to get along with nation, and tribe with tribe, and individual with individual. It's good that people work towards that end in our world.

- It's good there are people who try to bring nations to the negotiating table.
- It's good there are people who try to help individuals reconcile with each other.

Yet, those things aren't at the heart of the angels' message to the shepherds. If they were, how would you reconcile them with Jesus words (Luke 12:51-53):

Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter ...

Again, the peace God promises in Jesus is specific. It has to do with peace between God and individuals. The Bible tells us we humans aren't at peace with God. There are different ways you can put it:

- We're at war with God.

- We're in rebellion against God.
- All is not right between us and God.
- There's hostility between us and God.
- There's a barrier between God and us.

Relations are strained to say the least. We're not at harmony in our relationship with God. We're not at peace. It's not simply a feeling of not being at peace – it's a real, objective state. The result of remaining in that state is disastrous for us.

Jesus came at Christmas to do something about that particular problem. He came to bring about peace between God and us. The Bible's claim is that He achieved that – not in His birth, but at the cross. At the cross, He dealt with the problem that led to our lack of peace with God – namely, our rebellion. It's not the wars between nations that Jesus dealt with at the cross, but the war between humanity and God. Again, the difference is significant. If someone managed to achieve a lasting peace between the fighting factions in the Middle East and yet left all factions still alienated from God, have they understood the meaning of Christmas? I'm all for achieving peace between warring nations and stopping the bloodshed that comes from wars, but that's not what's primarily at the heart of Christmas.

I suspect part of our problem is we've separated Christmas and Easter. Easter has the nasty bits – the bits about the rejection of Jesus and the mocking and the cruel beatings and the crucifixion. Easter's a time for sombre reflections. Christmas just has the nice bits. It's a child's holiday. It's like a birthday party. It's a time for enjoyment and having fun. We've got to keep Christmas totally pleasant. After all, it's about the birth of a child –

and that's always a happy occasion. People like Jesus as a child – He's cute and cuddly and manageable and they don't have to take Him very seriously. And when *you* get the presents on His birthday, everything's fine and rosy.

Yet, we wouldn't remember the birth of this child if it were not for the cross. Sure, there were some special elements in His birth.

- Special prophecies are made.
- A woman conceives in an unusual way.
- Angels put in a few appearances.

Yet, if that's all there was to it, we wouldn't have a holiday for it today. Other people had special elements in their births – Isaac, Samson, John the Baptist – and we don't have holidays for them. Jesus' birth by itself wouldn't have done us one bit of good. It wasn't in His birth that He achieved peace with God for us.

In the long run, it's not you and I that determine the real meaning of Christmas. It's not Geoff Phillips. It's not the political leaders of this world. It's not even the religious leaders. It's God. God alone determines why He sent Jesus into the world. Before the creation of the world, God's purpose was that Jesus would die for human sin. Throughout the Old Testament, through the prophets, God made promises about what He'd do to fix up the problem caused by human rebellion. The events we celebrate at Christmas time are when God puts His plans into operation.

- Jesus comes to fulfil God's promises.
- Jesus comes to deal with the problem of human rebellion.
- Jesus, the eternal and powerful Son of God, is born as a male baby.

It's an amazing event – but it leads inevitably to the cross. That was always God's purpose in the birth of Jesus.

Jesus is the reason for the season – but not simply Jesus as a baby. The reason for the season is the Jesus package as a whole. It's only as we understand that package that we'll come to understand the real meaning of Christmas. We simply can't get to the heart of Christmas without going through the cross. Giving, goodwill, love, peace, tolerance, harmony – they're all great sentiments. There's nothing wrong with them – but, in themselves, they can never provide the real meaning of Christmas.