

I've been given the title "what does Jesus Christ think about Christmas." Before I come to that I want to ask what do you think about Christmas. It conjours up a whole spectrum of responses doesn't it? . At one end of the spectrum there is the magic of small children on Christmas day when they wake up and jump on mum and dad at 4.30, wide-eyed because Father Christmas has been in the middle of the night.

A little way down the spectrum lots of people use Christmas as a focus for a family party or a celebration for chasing away the mid-winter blues. And that's good. Nothing wrong with a party.

Moving on you start to get folk who are a little more miserable and cynical. People who think it's just an excuse for retailers to get us to spend our hard-earned cash. And then, about as far from the wonder-filled child as you can get you have people who not only hate it, but want to ruin it for everyone else as well. My grandmother hated Christmas and showed it in her gifts. One Christmas as a child my present was free sugar lumps she had picked up at the local garden centre coffee shop.

This is how Tom Lehrer described Christmas in song:

*Christmas time is here by golly  
Disapproval would be folly*

*Deck the hall with hunks of holly  
Fill the cup and don't say when  
Kill the turkeys ducks and chickens  
Mix the punch, drag out the dickens  
Even though the prospect sickens  
Brother here we go again*

He makes Ebenezer Scrooge look charitable. I wonder where you are on the spectrum. Do you love it or loathe it? Or loathe the consumerist feeding frenzy that the supermarkets want to turn it into? Do you relax and chill or do you stress out? I saw a figure last year that said that a third of Christmas dinners end with a heated family bust up and someone walking out. I don't know how you discover that statistic, but it would be depressing if it is true.

I asked a group of friends last week what they think of Christmas and got some interesting answers and some slightly ironic ones. A Ghanaian lady said how shocked she was when she arrived in the UK to find that Christmas involves giving presents, but without any real thought about why. She said "you just get sucked in because your kids get sucked in and you don't want them to stand out from the crowd."

Another comment: Britain has defined a good Christmas as getting lots of superfluous stuff. If the kids don't get the

latest gadgets there is always the threat they might ring childline.

Most were surprisingly cynical. They talked about buying for the sake of it, feeling pressured for a sixth of the year from October onwards. They talked about how society doesn't allow you to dissent without being called a scrooge. And they talked about how little we talk about what it really means and how easily we misunderstand it. One parent said their little boy came to them saying how cool it was that the three wise men bought bugs and creepy crawlies to the baby Jesus. They said what do you mean and the little boy said "they brought him three presents – gold, insects and myrrh."

It may be that my friends are just more jaded and miserable than most people, but I don't think so. I think we have dumbed down Christmas to make it so much less than it really is. I basically want to be at the wonder end of the scale, but I often get left feeling slightly empty by the whole experience. I usually get to boxing day having had a great time but really feeling "well is that it for another year, then? I suppose it is." And secretly wishing that it had been rather more than it was. More wonderful, more gripping, more thrilling. I wanted a time when my spirit soared, when I felt my pulse racing with excitement like I did when

I was a kid. And I got family parties and that was lovely, but left something missing.

I've been trying to analyse why I get that slight feeling of anti-climax and disappointment despite all the good stuff and come to the conclusion that it is because I and Christians and certainly British society at large have turned Christmas into much much less than it actually is. A baby in a manger, children's activities and nativities, meals and festivities, cards and presents, carols and choirs are all nice, but they are a million miles away from the Christmas story in, for example, Isaiah 9. They are a sentimentalised version that is emotionally appealing but hardly life-changing. And if the birth of Jesus Christ as the Bible presents him is anything it ought to be life-changing. It ought to be world-changing. I want Christmas to change my life. I want it to shape my worldview. I want it to affect my deepest longings. I want it to speak to my heart aches and hurts. I want it to tell me about a God who loves me enough to come for me. And British Christmas basically fails.

Isaiah was writing for a people who were distressed. When he was writing they were in a dark time and it was going to get much darker. You see how he describes it:

- There will be no more gloom for those who were in distress v1

- There are people who are walking in darkness v2

The reason is that they had walked away from God. They were his people but they had decided they didn't want him anymore. Its like they had been gathered round a camp fire at night, enjoying the warmth, enjoying the light and the protection, but incomprehensibly decided they would prefer the darkness. So they turned their back on the fire and walked off into the night. And worse even than that, they had rejected God's calls to return so often that he finally drew a line in the sand and said "if that's how you want it, you are now under my judgement. You won't be *able* to turn and come back. If you want to be away from me in the darkness, in the darkness you shall be." There is gloom and darkness. They are in the tunnel and there is no light at either end.

I can scarcely think of a better way to describe much of the world as I look around at the moment. What a confused mess of a place. Huge economic bubbles built on non-existent money, teenage pregnancy crises to which the proposed answer is either epidemic abortion rates or teaching sex to 5 year olds in the hope that it will put them off. Interminable low level wars as muslim ideology clashes with what it perceives as Western decadence. Funeral cortege after funeral cortege driving through Wooton Bassett. Elected representatives not understanding the

difference between expenses and entitlements. Neo-nazi fundamentalists gaining political mandates because people are so disenfranchised with everything else. This year has had it all, hasn't it? Gloom and darkness, personally, nationally, and internationally.

So the lights were going out for the people. They were stuck in pain and disaster. And then we get Isaiah 9. Which is a promise that God is going to do something about it. His answer is a child born at Christmas. What I want at Christmas is how God deals with my life being mucked up and the whole world being mucked up. My experience of the world often being difficult.

It says this child is a gift, a wonderful treasure from God to people who don't deserve it. The normal message of Christmas we hear is that you give to the deserving "he knows if you are sleeping, he knows if you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good so be good for goodness sake." I tend to give gifts to people who deserve them, or family members who don't but its better for all concerned to do it.

This child is he best gift and he is given because we are bad. For our good. It says he is going to reign rightly, upholding justice. Don't you long for that? Christmas is a sign that it is coming because we are celebrating this child. Christmas

ought to be completely about the fact that God is coming as a child – and then a man who will die to rescue us. Its about rescue from this mess. There is a Lord who didn't leave them in the shadow of death.

When you are upstairs and you can hear your children causing trouble and making war with each other downstairs, what do you do. First you send your word ahead of you. And then you come downstairs in person. You incarnate yourself in the lounge and you step into the trouble and make peace. That's what God is doing here. He sent his word, then he came.

This child, given so freely, tender, vulnerable and small, is none other than God Himself. He will be called wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. In other words He is the one who stands with us telling us the truth. He is the creator who rules over us with power and controls the whole of life and eternity. He is our Father, who we can talk to, who takes us by the hand and encourages us to call Him Abba – daddy. He is the Prince of Peace – so much more than the absence of war. Genuine peace with God and peace on earth under His rule.

So what does Jesus Christ think of Christmas.

Jesus Christ loves Christmas, when Christmas is about God's wonderful promises to put right all the inequity that

makes human society so degraded and dirty. It says that all the scandal and deceit of the human heart will be dealt with by the Christ-child as his government spreads across the whole earth. It says that people find perfect fulfilment with him.

But he hates Christmas when the baby in the manger is reduced to a sentimental, emotional, cute but inconsequential seasonal marketing tool. He is God come to rescue. He is God saying “look at your shattered dreams and the state of your nation and your broken world and look what God has in store at Christmas. He is God come close to say “don’t think that presents and materialism and are God.” We sing nice carols “O Come let us adore him.” Jesus Christ wants us to think that family and food and presents and consumption are not the things to adore. He is. I pray that everyone who hears about Christmas this morning will be blown away by how much God promises refreshment for a thirsty world. I pray that you will be dissatisfied with a Christmas that is anything less than gripping and life-changing. I pray that coming to Christmas will renew and excite your expectations of all that God can do in your life and in the world. The Christmas promise is about new life, new direction, new hope because of a new King. All because of a child promised so long ago whose birth is celebrated at Christmas.