

# Jesus & Jingle Bells

18 December 2021



I remember singing the Christmas carol *'Away in a Manger'* and realising that one of the lines didn't really make sense. I'd sang it in childhood pageants and family sing-songs over the years, but when I thought about it one day, it suddenly seemed to defy all logic:

*"The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes*

*no crying He makes."*

*But little Lord Jesus,*

Jesus, who publicly shed tears over the city of Jerusalem and openly wept at the tomb of Lazarus as a grown man, probably had more reason to cry than any baby who has ever been born. And yet year after year, people gather to unquestioningly sing a statement that could not possibly have been true, as if He was some little unflappable, detached visitor from another galaxy. And in a way, that one line is a microcosm of mainstream Christmas celebration itself: well-intentioned but abstracted beyond recognition, and ultimately bearing more evidence of the imagination of man than the truth of God.

## **The Birth of Jesus**

More than two thousand years later, there's a whole lot the world gets wrong about the birth of Jesus. For example, it's unlikely He was actually surrounded by attentive, well-behaved farmyard animals. And we can be absolutely certain that there wasn't a celestial glow surrounding the new family. We're never told that there were three wise men – just three gifts – and they would've only visited months, or even years later. That's why King Herod ordered the deaths of all boys two years and younger and why Matthew described them as *"coming to the house"* and finding Jesus there with Mary. In fact, we don't even have the Christmas date right: Jesus was most likely born in September, judging by the birth of His cousin, John the Baptist. It was Hippolytus of Rome, an early church theologian, who in the third century declared Jesus' birth to be December the 25th, allegedly based on his own calculations.

## **Easter is Mentioned More in the Bible**

The Bible itself doesn't place a high priority on repeatedly observing or celebrating the birth of Jesus. His final hours and crucifixion are recorded meticulously and in the most remarkable detail in all four gospel accounts. At the same time, the story of His birth is left out entirely in two of them. We never hear the nativity story retold anywhere in the preaching of Acts, or the letters written to the various churches. There's no indication that the apostles made very much of the circumstances of Jesus' entrance into the world. As His followers, they would have known the details, but there didn't seem to be a significant priority placed on passing them on. Rather, it's His death and resurrection we've been commanded by Jesus Himself to remember and commemorate, which makes Easter a calendar marker with far sturdier Biblical foundations.

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## **Christmas Traditions & Trinkets**

To complicate the whole thing further, many different symbols and practices have become part of the Christmas story in the years since it actually happened, and that's where things become tricky for Christians today. The narrative was hijacked. Traditions were borrowed. We're left with seasonal symbols, like uninvited houseguests, that have nothing at all to do with the Son of God becoming incarnate in order to save the world. We have a tree with presents underneath it, stockings, mistletoe, candy canes and an elderly man in a red suit breaking into people's homes while they're asleep. (Spoiler alert: he's not real.)

Endless words have been devoted to understanding exactly where all these extra-Biblical traditions came from, what they mean, and why we should either relax and enjoy them or recoil and avoid them. But regardless of what you may personally believe, Christmas undoubtedly represents a kind of mash-up like none other that exists in our modern society, where sacred mixes with secular, faith mixes with fiction, prophecies mix with profits and Jesus mixes with Jingle Bells. And in the middle of all this, with heads spinning at what is being done in the name of our Saviour, is the church. And one big, complicated question:

What exactly are we supposed to do with Christmas – this tidal wave of worldliness that somehow includes the title of Jesus in its name?

## **What to Do with Christmas**

### **Start with Jesus**

Firstly, for those who claim to be His followers, the starting point must be Jesus Himself. It does not matter how He is depicted or commercially co-opted into the business of the festive season, it matters who He truly is and what that means. When He walked this earth, Jesus was utterly selfless,

humble and obedient (Philippians 2:6-8). He was not a frozen prop in a nativity scene – He was a flesh-and-blood person, fully God and fully man, walking the long road that human beings must walk, and identifying with us in every way (Hebrews 4:15). He refused to bow to the intoxicating idols of materialism and wealth (Matthew 4:8-10), and lived a life devoted to giving, not getting (Mark 10:45). Anything that shows us a different Jesus, a sanitized Jesus, a tamed Jesus, or a diminished Jesus must be rejected. At Christmas, and on all the other days of the year, there's only room for the true Jesus. We may not be able to control how He is represented in society at large, but we can control how we choose to see Him.

## **Love, Despite Differences**

Secondly, we as believers must strive to walk in the fullness of Jesus' prayer to the Father for us in John 17:23 (NIV), *"... so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."*

When it comes to disputable matters we are free to act according to our own consciences, but that can create division amongst us if we're not careful with each other. And so we should be able to bear with one another in issues that are essentially peripheral, yet stay unified in the main things. As theologian John Stott once put it, *"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."* Some may feel that putting up a tree or dressing up as Santa are simply innocent, fun and harmless practices that have no bearing on their lives and create no hindrances to their faith. Others may feel that the historical associations are too suspect, too corrupted to be redeemed and that we should actively avoid them. The key in these types of disputable matters – which is what these arguably are – is to allow one another the freedom to follow our own convictions without being harsh (Romans 14:1-8). This is the biggest testimony we have to the world – the way we love each other despite our differences. And so there will be differing opinions within the church. We should be relaxed about what is peripheral, like certain types of innocent decorations or traditions, and unified in what is foundational, which is the gospel message.

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## **Know the Battles**

Lastly, one of the most important things we can do at Christmas is to know the battles that we're fighting. Surely one of the most serious offences to God during Christmas is not the symbols that are involved, but the sin that is encouraged. Greed is sin, and so is coveting, and so is gluttony. Christmas has many wonderful aspects to it, like family, friends and holiday rest, but it also incorporates significant amounts of materialism, envy and unnecessary debt. Our children learn these things from the world around them by osmosis; worldliness simply slips into their thinking. On Christmas morning they can hardly wait to open their presents – which is completely understandable, by the way – but their single-minded focus on receiving gifts and comparing them to others can lead to ingratitude if they are disappointed.

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### **Jesus: The Only Gift That Matters**

Parents can be tempted to treat the story of Jesus as a perfunctory foreword to the real event, which is the presents, as if shovelling vegetables into their mouths so they can eat the pudding. But the message of Jesus is not the introduction before the presents – it's the main event and the only gift that matters. We've got a chance to teach them that and stem the madness of the unrelenting, selfish world around them. That's a battle worth fighting. We have the chance to resist the urge to find our own significance in how happy presents make them, ignore comparisons with other households and somehow teach them during this season that it really is better to give than to receive. That's a battle worth fighting. We have a chance to leverage this moment to shape the minds of the next generation in the direction of what Jesus wants from their lives, and teach them to actually be different from the rest of the world. That's a battle worth fighting.

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In many ways, mainstream Christmas is everything that it shouldn't be. But we don't have to let it steamroll over us, as we can do something about it. The people of God are many things, but powerless is not one of them. We can do this thing together in unity, leveraging the moment to love one another, to make the most of the opportunity to shape our families the way God wants us to, and even to proclaim the life-giving, eternity-altering gospel to those who may never really consider spiritual matters except for once a year, on December the 25th.

### **Take The World, But Give Me Jesus**

One day in 1879, Fanny Crosby's neighbour was complaining bitterly to her about his lack of wealth and how he could make an impression on the world if he just had more. "*Take the world,*" she replied to him, "*but give me Jesus.*" The phrase stuck with her so much that she wrote a hymn using that line, and it's still sung today.

And that's exactly it. That's our answer during Christmas, and in every stage or season we encounter. Because it's always the right answer. Take the world, but give me Jesus.