

The Meaning of Christmas

by

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And so the month of December has arrived. It's the month when we begin to think of lazy summer days spent in the sun, of holidays, and of recharging our worn-out batteries. But it's also a very crazy month when we begin to look forward to Christmas and presents, Christmas trees and tinsel, mince pies and eggnog (if you have a more traditional outlook), or perhaps biltong and beer (if you don't). We start dusting off the Christmas candles and festive ornaments, check that the Christmas lights still work, hang up the mistletoe, go shopping for Christmas presents for our loved ones, hang up advent calendars for our children (and for the child within), put up Christmas trees and gather together to decorate it, get the old favourite Christmas stories off the bookshelves, roast chestnuts over an open fire, and have images of sugarplum fairies dancing in our heads. It's a time when the more industrious amongst us start frantically baking up a storm, in preparation for the hordes descending upon us for what is ultimately a time for family and loved ones.

As you can see, I love Christmas, and everything it entails. I'm not very good at getting prepared in time, and often run around like a mad thing at the last minute, trying to get everything done, but I'm like a kid around this time of the year. I start getting excited as soon as the weather warms up enough to start wearing t-shirts and summer dresses, when the open-toed sandals come out of storage, and it becomes mandatory to paint our toenails. And that's somewhere in September! I love the smell of real pine needles, and the sound of Christmas carols on the radio. I love the cheesy Christmas movies on tv, and the expectation of things to come.

But it's easy to become so wrapped up in the commercial trappings of Christmas that we forget what the real meaning of Christmas is. I'm not saying that all these other things are meaningless or unimportant. They give us joy, and it's the small things in life that make life worth living. That's as it should be. But we should also remember the most important gift of all, a gift that God gave us more than 2000 years ago. The gift of his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, who was sent down to earth as a baby, and to grow up as a man, to save us all, from ourselves.

This world must have been a very scary place for Christians back then, although they weren't called Christians, because Christ hadn't been born yet. The idea of repentance and redemption hadn't been created, and it was so easy to sin (as it is now, being the fallible creatures that we are), yet so hard to make amends with God and to ensure a place in Heaven. God destroyed the world, and the people in it, with the flood when he saw that only one family out of so many had managed to remain faithful to Him. He swore that he wouldn't do it again, and gave us the rainbow as a physical sign of that promise. But He did destroy Sodom and Gomorrah when the people there got out of hand and refused to repent of their sinful ways. God must have gotten tired of constantly having to destroy His own creation, because of our selfishness and short-sightedness, and He must have foreseen how many more times He would have to do it throughout the ages, and I believe THAT is why He decided to send Jesus, to die on the cross for our sins, so that we could have a constant reminder of His incredible love for us, and be able to simply ask for forgiveness, if that is what our hearts truly desire, and we'd receive it instantly. No more burnt offerings. No more sacrifices. No more chastisements. We'd simply be able to ask, and receive, because Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for us, on our behalf.

And it couldn't have been easy for Him either. Yes, He's God, but He was born as a man, and had most of the earthly experiences that we've had. He had a family, and friends, that He loved. He had a job as a carpenter, before God called him to His ministry. He had a life. And within a matter of three years, he went from having to leave that life and everything He loved, to having to die on the cross for our sins. He was a year younger than I am now! That's incredible to me, and I have a tough time wrapping my mind around it. He was a man, and it must have been incredible mental anguish and physical torture for Him to have to endure all that He did.....for us. Because He loves us.

One could argue that we would die for our own children, so therefore it can't have been all that hard for Christ to die for us, when we are His children. However, one must remember that although God is ONE God, He is also made up of three parts, functioning completely separately from each other. They are THREE in ONE. And therefore, Christ who was on earth here with us, mankind, wasn't our Father. Our Father was still in Heaven. Our saviour, Jesus Christ, was on earth with us, and He must have really struggled with it. He knew what He had to do, what He was put here for, but He was in an earthly body with earthly thoughts and feelings, and all I can say is that He must REALLY love us to have endured all that pain and ridicule, for us.

Jesus Christ is the greatest gift of all. He gave us the very real possibility of eternal life. He made the practical aspects of talking to God so much easier by becoming our very own personal Intercessor. Before then, only a very select few could hope to talk to God. He brought us closer to God, making God more accessible, and allowed us the opportunity to develop a very real, very close relationship with God. Jesus also saved us from ourselves. And He gave His life for us, so that we might live. He DIED so that we might LIVE! Isn't that amazing???

And what do we do with this gift of life that we've been given? Do we appreciate every second of life that we've been given? Do we praise God and show him that we love Him every minute of every day? Do we do our utmost to discover what our individual purpose is and go out of our way to fulfil that purpose? Do we practise God's unconditional love on each other and allow His light to shine through us? Only you can answer these very personal questions for yourselves, and decide if there's anything you want to do about it.

But as we enter the second week of Advent, I lay a challenge before you, a challenge that I do my very best to take up as well, never fear. Because I too am as fallible as they come, and have no reason to think that I'm any better than any of you who might be reading this editorial. I'm a sinner, and I have to struggle between what I want, and what God wants, every day. I have a temper, and I'm impatient, and I'm intolerant, and I'm a loudmouth, and I often put my foot in my mouth without even realising it, and so many other things besides. But I love God, with all my heart, and I WANT to follow Him, and to make Him happy. It's not always easy, but the trick is to never give up. Keep on trying. Keep on looking up. Keep on praying. Keep on waking up each morning with a good intention in your heart.

So I challenge you this festive season to do just that. Keep the REAL meaning of Christmas foremost in your minds and hearts these next three weeks, and practice God's love on each other. Be charitable, in all its intrinsic meanings, be loving, be tolerant, be kind, be infinitely patient, as hard as that might be sometimes, and don't ever give up. Don't beat yourselves up if you don't win the battle every single day, because God loves us anyway. He will be pleased just to see how hard we are trying to please Him, to show Him just how much we love Him, and that we appreciate the incredible sacrifice He made for us 2010 years ago. Just don't every stop trying.

Love your families, whether it be your blood family of a husband, wife, child, parent, grandparent, sibling and others. Or a family of kinship and emotional bonds that have come about out of mutual need and necessity. Or even the family of St. Francis, and the greater family of God's children. Everyone matters, and no one should be disqualified because they don't fit into our idea of what the "perfect" family or the "perfect Christian" should be. There's no such thing as "perfect", except in Heaven. Each of us have something to learn, and something to contribute. And there's no time like the present to perfect what needs perfecting, and to change what needs changing. It'll all be worth it in the end. Why? Because.....Family Matters!

With love, and the hope of God's richest blessings on your lives this festive season,

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