

What's it all about?

A few years ago I came across some very amusing but highly thought-provoking Christmas cartoons. In one of them, two puzzled boys were staring at a large letter 'E' that lay beside their feet in a busy shopping precinct. Above them hung a banner which read:

GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGH ST.

Sadly, for many, that is all Christmas has become. Bulging cash tills at mega-stores, bustling crowds searching for their last minute bargains, bewildered children wondering if Christmas Day will deliver their longed-for 'must-have' gift, reflecting this year's latest craze perhaps. Presents, parties, over-spending and over-indulging - that, for many, sums up their Christmas.



Social researchers tell us that Christmas is one of the most pressurised times of year for families, on a par with moving house! That reminds me of another Christmas cartoon I came across. Two harassed husbands were deep in conversation in the supermarket queue. "If this is what Christmas is all about," said one man to the other, "I would like to get my hands on whoever came up with the idea!"

Well, Christmas was God's idea originally. But as with so many of God's brightest and most brilliant ideas, along came man and muddied the waters, overlaying the wonder-miracle of the Christ's conception with rampant commercialism.

Simple, yet Profound

This is why it is good for all of us to get back to the simplicity and profundity of what happened at the first Christmas, 2000 years ago.

- Not the razzmatazz of glitzy shops with shelves piled high full of alluring gifts; but the simplicity of an animal's feeding trough for the Son of God to rest in, as his first bed.
- Not an endless round of extravagant parties; but a group of nightshift workers going about their ordinary everyday business on the hillsides around Bethlehem - when suddenly God broke into their lives with the most amazing news the world has ever been given.



- Not the 'What-I-am-going-to-be-getting?' mentality of so many in today's world, both young and old; but distant travellers from the east bearing carefully chosen gifts to present to God's new-born king.
- Not people waking up with a shocking hangover from their previous night's excesses; but Mary pondering and treasuring in her heart all the extraordinary events of that first Christmas night.

How should we celebrate?

The simplicity and profundity of the first Christmas - as it *really* happened - compels us to ask ourselves a number of questions at this time of year.

- ⇒ **What am I going to be giving Jesus this Christmas?** Wise men (and women) chose carefully, and give of their best - in terms of their time and attention, love and affection.

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give him, give my heart.
[Christina Georgina Rossetti,
In the bleak mid-winter]*

- ⇒ **What will I be treasuring most from this year's celebrations in years to come?** There's nothing more valuable than the abiding presence of Jesus with us day by day.

*I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord ... I consider them all rubbish, that I may gain Christ.
[Paul, in Philippians 3.8]*

- ⇒ **What will I be pondering after all the decorations have come?** John never lost his sense of wonder at what he had been privileged to experience first-hand, and was eager for others to hear about it too.

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched - this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.
The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.
We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.
[1 John 1.1-4]*

Seize the Moment

So let us all seek to make the most of all the good *worship* opportunities that Christmas provides us with, so we give Jesus his rightful central place at the heart of our festive celebrations. And let's all endeavour to make good use too of all the *outreach* opportunities we have provided, to share the message of Jesus with those who are yet to receive him as their own Lord and Saviour. Be a part of our celebrations this Christmas:-



- ✓ **Christmas Special, Tuesday 9th December, 7.00-8.30pm** - an evening of 'Food and Fun for all the Family', incorporating some musical items, games, quizzes, carol singing, seasonal food, and a video of the Christmas story. Ideal for those not used to attending church services.
- ✓ **Christmas All-age Service, Sunday 21st December, 11.00am - 12 noon**, with contributions from our children and young people. Suitable for young and old alike.
- ✓ **International Fellowship Tea, Sunday 21st December, 5.30pm**, a good opportunity to enjoy informal fellowship with people from near and far; and a chance to get into good voice with some carol choices before our main ...
- ✓ **Christmas Carol Service, Sunday 21st December, 6.30-7.45pm**, with our very own newly-formed singing group and praise band!
- ✓ **Christmas Day Thanksgiving Service, Thursday 25th December, 11.00-11.45am**, an opportunity to return our thanks to the true Source of every good gift we receive - especially our Father God's most precious Gift of all.

*Every good and perfect gift is from above,
coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.
... Thanks be to God for his gift beyond words!
[James 1.17; 2 Corinthians 9.15];*

The Christmas Day service will be followed by a special **Invitation Christmas Dinner** for those who worship with us from overseas and who would otherwise be on their own on Christmas Day.



Please make good use of all the Christmas publicity we have produced, to invite friends and neighbours to these special events.

News Update

- At our recent Church Member's meeting, we were delighted to accept **James Appiah-Pippim** for membership of the church. This brings the total number of new members to 16 over the last two years, for which we give God all the praise and glory.
- We also agreed to ask Michael Drage, a Christian architect, to provide detailed costings for the **refurbishment work** that needs to be carried out on our church buildings. Michael's architectural practise has built up a great deal of experience of this kind of work, including recent projects at Westgate Road Baptist Church in Newcastle and Beacon Lough Baptist Church in Gateshead. Please pray for him as he undertakes this work for us. And please pray too that we will be successful in applying for grants to cover the cost of this initial work (just over £3,000).
- The Church Meeting also considered whether or not we should top-up our contributions to the Baptist Union's **Home Mission** Fund and to the **Baptist Missionary Society** from our General Fund this year, as our direct giving to these two causes is likely to fall short of the targets we set. As with the government's proposals for university top-up fees, the suggestion generated plenty of debate (!) and has been remitted back to the Deacons for further consideration. Please let us know what thoughts you have on the matter.
- We also considered briefly what arrangements we should make for **children and young people** on Sunday mornings. The Lord has blessed us with a wide age-range of children and young people, for which we thank him, of course - having prayed for new families to attend the church! But we are keen to make sure they all receive a teaching programme that is well fitted to their age and stage of development. Jesus told us to *pray to the Lord of the harvest to raise up workers* whenever we see new opportunities emerging (Mathew 9.37-38).
- Please remember in your prayers **Val Hill** and **Maya Yefimenko** who are both awaiting surgery at the time of writing.

Let me wish you all a very joyful Christmas, whether you are one of our regular worshippers, or receiving this letter by the wonders of e-mail in some faraway part of the world! **God's Saviour is for everyone everywhere.** May we enjoy Him more than anything else this Christmas.

David Hunt