



Christmas – A feast about Christ

All over the world people celebrate Christmas; even non-Christians join in the festivities. Is it really important to celebrate Christmas? How should we celebrate it?

Many Christmas customs are far removed from the Christian faith. It is often only about cheerfulness and merrymaking, with a lot of eating, drinking and partying. People give each other gifts. They spend a fortune, and everywhere in shops the well-known Christmas carols are played over and over, although very few people listen to the words or even think about their meaning. Father Christmas is employed as a powerful marketing tool. The whole aim is to create an atmosphere of 'goodwill'. We are seduced into spending money generously, into 'buying stuff we don't really want with money we don't really have'. How successful the season has been is measured by business' turnover, and the amount of money that has been spent.

What are we actually celebrating?

Of course Christmas has special meaning for Christians. During this season we celebrate the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ. We focus on the meaning of his coming to this world. This is more than enough reason for us to celebrate. We have received the good news of great joy that is intended for all people (Luke 2:10). The wonderful news is this: In the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord! (Luke 2:11)

Who is this Saviour?

We believe it is God himself who became man. We believe this is what truly happened with the birth of Christ: God became man. Jesus is Immanuel. It means: God with us (Matthew 1:23). In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1), becoming flesh and making his dwelling among us. About this Word – Christ - that became human, the apostle John said: *"we have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14).

This mystery of God becoming human is hard to understand, but it forms the basis of our Christian faith. If Jesus were no more than an ordinary man, all his deeds would have had little meaning. But because he was truly God, his life, his miracles, his sermons, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension has special meaning. It is God himself interceding to save mankind – and the whole world – from the misery we are enduring through our own doing. Jesus is the Messiah, the One whom God would send to make the whole world new. Therefore, at his birth a new time began, a new era in human history. It was as if a new day dawned, a bright light shining on those who have lived in the shadow of death (Isaiah 9:1-6).

There's no other way. We simply have to celebrate his birth. When Jesus' birth was proclaimed in the fields outside Bethlehem, the angels could hardly contain themselves. They proclaimed the good news, praising God in a mighty chorus (Luke 2:13-14). And the shepherds started telling others what they had heard. How can we possibly neglect to do this? How can we stay silent?

How should we celebrate Christmas?

Most people who celebrate Christmas in abundance have no idea what it is really all about. Many of these celebrations have little or nothing at all to do with Christ. But for us Christians the celebrations assume a special character, differing from those of the world. We focus on the true meaning of Christmas. We do celebrate this special event, but the celebrations give all the glory to God, directing our attention to God's greatest gift to the world – Jesus Christ!

Gifts

One of the traditions at Christmas is giving gifts. Families spend a lot of time and money buying each other beautiful gifts. They usually do it in secret, so that the gifts may be a surprise. Sometimes, Father Christmas delivers the gifts. Of course, children get very excited. They can hardly sleep the night before because of their boundless excitement. While opening their gifts, their eyes sparkle. Actually, this obscures their understanding of the true meaning of Christmas. It's the reason they are so happy, and it is also what they remember most: the gifts they get.

In Christian homes the parents usually explain to us that we receive gifts because God has given us the greatest gift – his own Son! Consequently, our gifts should remind us that we can only be truly happy if we're willing to give. If we care about one another and try to make one another happy, we will experience joy, too. Unfortunately, we don't often think like this. We are far more concerned about receiving than about giving. If we would really like to know what Christmas is all about we should remember it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). God teaches us this truth at Christmastime. He gave the Greatest Gift – without receiving anything in return.

Some families apply this truth by not only giving gifts to one another, but also to less fortunate people. If we reach out to those with no income, and who cannot 'repay' us, we are beginning to understand a small part of God's love as revealed in Christ's birth.

Lights and Christmas trees

Another tradition usually associated with Christmas is putting up a Christmas tree covered in lights and other decorations. Usually the gifts are placed under the tree. This custom doesn't come from the Bible. Likewise, the lights that are put up in many towns at Christmastime are of very little value as Christian symbols. They do, however, create a festive atmosphere, and draw visitors to such towns, but their economic value far exceeds their spiritual value. They are little more than pretty decorations. However, we can interpret the symbol of light in a Christian way, thereby getting the right message across. Lights arranged in the form of a cross or star, may focus the attention on Jesus. Candlesticks and candles may also be used as striking Christian symbols. Jesus came to earth as the Light of the World. *'The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it'* (John 1:5).

Christmas and the church

Some churches don't bother to go to a lot of trouble to celebrate Christmas. Often, these are the same churches that make a big fuss about Easter and Pentecost. Easter, especially, gets extraordinary attention. But at Christmas, the same churches are quite empty. Nothing special happens, and people make no effort to come to church.

In some other churches, it is almost the exact opposite. They have two Christmas services to accommodate everyone, but at Easter the church is almost empty as everyone has gone away on holiday. Many of those who fill the church to capacity at Christmas are often unfortunately the same ones who only go to church very rarely. Furthermore, they attend the earliest possible service so that they can do as they please for the rest of the day. Eventually, they don't take Christmas very seriously either.

But what can churches do to ensure that their members celebrate Christmas correctly?

Advent

Advent is the time on the church calendar when we prepare for Christmas. It includes the four Sundays leading up to Christmas that are set aside for sermons about the meaning of Jesus' coming (advent) to earth. It is similar to Holy Week, when we prepare for Easter. We get into the right spirit for Christmas if we allow God's Word to speak to our hearts. The better we understand the significance of Christ's coming, the greater our joy. Abundant joy is definitely the most important characteristic of this time, which culminates in Christmas.

Christmas hymns and Christmas carol services

Here in Africa, God has given us a special ability to sing. Africans almost automatically express their joy through singing. Of course, this fits in wonderfully with the joyful spirit of Christmas.

Christmas carols have been an integral part of the church's Christmas celebrations since the earliest times. It all started with the angel choir in the fields outside Bethlehem on the night Jesus was born. Their singing heralded his birth, while also celebrating the good news.

It is true that many churches' Christmas programmes consist almost entirely of carol singing. In most instances, an entire church service is set aside for this purpose. Usually many choirs take part, each singing a few carols that they have been taught. From time to time, the congregation joins in. Various people also read appropriate Scriptures. The sermon is usually brief or left out all together. In some churches, such a carol service may last all through the night.

Another good approach is a group of youths, other members of the church, or even a choir visiting people's homes to sing carols. This usually happens on Christmas Eve (the night before Christmas). It's always a very special praise and worship experience, for those going to sing as well those who are privileged to be sung to.

Therefore, it is a big challenge to sing the best-loved carols in such a way that they will grab people's hearts anew, moving them to true praise and worship. But there is also a genuine need for new indigenous African carols. Only when we have carols that come from our own hearts, in our own languages, and with rhythms speaking to the African soul, will we experience the true meaning of celebrating Christmas through singing.

Being together

Families' getting together forms an important part of Christmas. It's very good that people go to great lengths to go home, and to be together. When Jesus came to earth, he brought people together in love, as families, but also as communities. He proclaimed reconciliation and peace, teaching people how to truly love one another, and others. This was precisely the gift the angels sang about, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests' (Luke 2:14). There are many lonely people all around us. Within our congregation, we become one another's family, united in God. So it would be great if congregations and members could do more to reach out to those who are lonely, old, ill, hungry or outcast – perhaps more so at Christmastime.

Festive meals!

It is interesting that many people – even in the poorest parts of Africa – see Christmas as the one event during the year when it's important to eat very well. When older Malawians see rice on the table instead of porridge, they often ask, 'But is it Christmas?' Maybe this brings a smile to God's face because it shows they truly see

Christmas as a reason to celebrate. Who in Africa thinks of a celebration without immediately thinking of good food? So we are allowed to celebrate Christmas like this – and enjoy ourselves, also at church! It's a joyful celebration. We may eat and laugh and sing. Yet, God's children celebrating this occasion will be different. Because, like the people of Africa who never eat alone, the inhabitants of God's new world should always share whatever they have – however little they have . . .

Christmas is all about celebrating the birth of Christ. It is more than just a birthday celebration. We don't simply recall that Christ was born. We especially recall Who was born: Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11). He is the Messiah whom God sent to the world to recreate it. Through him, God's kingdom comes, and we share in it. We are recreated, and so is everything around us. That's why we celebrate. Because of Christ. We celebrate Christ, sent by God, to us and for us.