



THE NEW SHOFAR

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

Christmas

We do not have to put Christ back into Christmas – he never left it!

Christmas has long been a time of great clashing paradoxes. It is hard to not see the juxtaposition of Christianity and a kind of carnival mentality, the humility and poverty of the stable confused with the wealth and indulgence of selfishness and gift giving; the quietness of Bethlehem with the din of the shopping mall; the seriousness of the incarnation with the silliness of the party spirit and party attitude; the blinking-coloured lights juxtaposed with the star of heaven.

From a biblical perspective this is little more than a magnificent confusion designed by The Enemy of men's souls. It is just so hard to argue against this great spendathon Christmas has become. Cheap plastic toys mixed with the true gift of the wise men, angels confused with flying reindeer, an ox and an ass in a stable confused with a red-nosed reindeer, of all things, the filth of the stable confused with the whiteness of fresh snow. And on it goes. Mary and Joseph, the North Pole elves, all of these things even further making it difficult for those who do not know God to come to a genuine experience of the true meaning of Christmas.

It all goes back to our starting point – what do we want Christmas to be?

So much chaos and confusion! It leaves us wondering: What is the celebration of the birth of Christ really about? Alternatively, we could approach Christmas from the standpoint of the Old Testament prophets. Then there is the standpoint of Mary or Joseph. What about the perspective of the angels or the shepherds or even the wise men who came later? Then there is the standpoint of the innkeeper, or Herod, who had a lot at stake in his own mind.

Christmas seems to have become whatever we want it to be and we do not pause often enough to ask ourselves what Christmas should mean or does mean. The only way to answer our question is to come at it from the point of view of God because Christmas is something God did. It is a heavenly gift, a gift that was given for a reason, for a purpose. God initiated Christmas for our salvation. Here is the way St Paul puts it...*Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped or seized, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave and being made in the likeness of men (Philippians 2).* From a more poetic

writer, St John writes in the opening of his Gospel... *And the Word became flesh **and lived among us**, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son...*

A key part of Paul's understanding is that Jesus Christ left behind his position in heaven (using human language) where he was God's Son and took on the fullness of our human existence (being). He "pitched his tent" among us (the literal translation). Made his home here. He was still God but was also fully human. Human and divine. What a "descent" that was! From King to baby in swaddling clothing. From heavenly realms to a manger in a stinking, filthy, dark and overheated stable. From being lauded and praised by heavenly choirs to having bogan shepherds peering through the hay to catch a glimpse of this child wonder. Just one more Jewish baby from Galilee. To understand this is to understand Christmas.

The Truth is – we need Christmas

How do we know we **need** Christmas? Because it is God's free gift to **us**, a gift for the transformation of the world, a reconstitution of what men and women lost through their disobedience. God did not send his only Son to share our humanity because he wanted him to have some work experience. God knew we had lost our way, how humanity was struggling to be all it was created to be. Try as we did over millennia, we floundered around in darkness, sometimes finding good times and then finding ourselves being overwhelmed by someone else's power play, selfishness or hubris. We were far from the Garden of Eden, in a place God did not want us to remain. In our Christmas celebrations, what we are doing in joining in with what God is doing: bringing to fruition preparations that began with the call of Abraham, a call reiterated by judges, kings, prophets and a myriad of faithful and holy men and women down through the story of Israel. God has never left us on our own but like the hound of heaven has pursued us down the highways and byways of history, of life, so that we can once more, in this life and in the life to come, walk hand in hand with him in the *cool of the evening*.

Is there a better hope for our world today? Look back over the last century and find examples of how human initiatives, human power and human politics has been able to lead us into a new Garden of Eden experience. It is not going to happen without God and this is why Christmas is so important. Sadly, much of the western world does not understand this and talk about Christmas in the papers is about the pain businesses are going to endure because of the financial situation. None of us is going to buy our way to a life of joy. Limited happiness possibly, but not the joy of walking with God in a Garden of Eden here in our own time, in a creation in which Jesus himself walked among us. Christmas truly is "Immanuel" – God with us. What more could we need?