

Abundant life

Jesus' great gift to us - and our gift to him

It's only mid-November but I thought I'd get the jump on preparing for Christmas now, taking into account how confusing this entire season has become, and especially for Christians, because we now have three types of Christmas to contend with.

Do we, for instance, try our best to put Christ back into Christmas and make it a fully religious celebration that concentrates only on why Christ was born? Or do we reject all the religious symbols attached to Christmas, because so many of them, including Christmas itself, have obvious and well-documented pagan origins? Or do we treat Christmas as a purely secular holiday, now that most people, including many Christians, see nothing pagan in the traditional festivities, and it's all just a bit of fun for the family?

Or do we somehow combine all three, or bits of all three, depending on our situation?

For those with no children or grandchildren to cater to, or young nieces and nephews, and no family close by, for instance, it's probably a lot easier to go the fully religious route and really concentrate on why Jesus was born, rather than be taken up with decorating and gift-buying, etc.

But for those who still have lingering sensitivities over the pagan origins of most traditions and customs of Christmas, it's difficult knowing quite what to do, especially if you have family that knows you're a bit sensitive about the pagan origins but wish you'd just get over it and join in with the fun.

But which bits of "fun" can you happily join in with, when you know Santa Claus is now an idol, and children are being taught they are entitled to gifts at Christmas? Some things about Christmas are so obviously wrong to us Christians, but to make an issue of them only upsets the family and makes Christianity very unattractive. It's a real tug-of-war between conscience and relationships, and between which lines in the sand you cannot cross and which hills are not worth dying on. Do you help with decorating the Christmas tree, for instance, to "keep the peace," when you don't feel at peace at all in yourself doing so? And do you attend Christmas office parties, when if you don't join in with all the drink-driven nonsense it hurts your relationships at work, but again it makes you feel really uncomfortable as a Christian?

Or have the rumblings of our conscience and resistance to all the nonsense at Christmas-time been soothed by the thought that Christmas is increasingly being treated as a secular holiday, not a religious one, and a “bit of fun” is really all it is now? Privately we can still avoid all the nonsense, of course, and maybe get away with not joining in with anything, but there are still nosy neighbours to worry about and what they might think if they drop by and notice your house has no signs of Christmas at all.

But, after some serious conversations with your conscience, and some concentrated study in 1 Corinthians 8 to 10 and Romans 14 to get some wisdom and balance in your head, you might then come to the conclusion that joining in with the Christmas festivities isn't displeasing to God, or at least it isn't in your circumstances. So you dip a toe into the secular waters of Christmas and join in with the fun as best you can.

But CAN you just “join in” when you can't help thinking how the secular, “fun-loving” Christmas totally ignores the increasingly scary reality of climate change? Most of the commercial wrapping paper used for Christmas presents, for instance, cannot be recycled because of the coating it's either covered in, or because of the ribbons attached to it, or because the glitter on it is made from microplastics which are now polluting just about everything we eat and drink and wash and groom ourselves with. And do you send out dozens of plastic and glitter infested Christmas cards that cannot be recycled either? And if the family is into buying hard plastic toys for the kids, none of which are recyclable and will all end up in the city dump, are you supposed to just ignore the obvious risk to the environment because “fun for the children” is all that counts at Christmas-time?

So now your Christian conscience takes another hit, this time in remembrance of God instituting us humans as caretakers of the planet in the book of Genesis, not exploiters of it for our own selfish purposes.

It gets worse too, because maybe you've read the history of how big corporations saw money to be made - and lots of it - from peddling all sorts of junk and baubles at Christmas-time, and made suckers out of all of us by clever marketing and advertising. It's now common knowledge that corporate greed replaced the Christianized paganism of Christmas as the driving force behind Christmas, to the point now that the entire economy of most western countries rests or falls on Christmas sales and frenzied shoppers gobbling up bargains to satisfy their required quota of gifts. And who dares step off that treadmill, including Christians, who are caught up in the frenzy like everyone else?

So now we're under pressure on three fronts - from those who want us to "put Christ back" into Christmas, from those who want us to reject Christmas because of its pagan roots, and from those who want us to accept that Christmas is now a secular holiday and nothing more. "Forget Christ and forget the pagan origins," they say; Christmas has evolved over the last century into time for fun and family, so why not just leave it at that?

And that suits atheists and members of other religions too, although some do admit to having trouble with Christmas, because society is still allowing Christian music to be played over the public airwaves, still allowing nativity scenes to be set up on city property, and still allowing a Christian day to be classed as a statutory holiday.

But all these twists and mental gymnastics required to get through Christmas become bearable and excusable, because it's such a wonderful time of year, where people are nicer to each other, families get together, the lights are so pretty, children are excited, gifts give pleasure, charities receive more money and goods, and the poor are given a special meal.

It seems like we've created something that actually works for a change, even if it is only for one day a year and many people cannot afford the expense of Christmas. It also risks people feeling terribly lonely if they have no family left, or close by, and it becomes a very sad day for those who've lost loved ones at Christmas-time. Christmas can also be easily spoiled in many families by drunkenness, family squabbles, and bratty kids who didn't get what they expected from Santa Claus.

So how do we weave our way as Christians through the self-indulgence, the waste, the blatant disregard for the planet, the ever-increasing secularizing of Christmas, and the pressure on both Christians and non-Christians to join in with all the customs and traditions associated with Christmas today - and at the same time not judge others for what they do at Christmas-time either?

Do you put your foot down and say, "Enough is enough" and head off to Cuba, or do you sit down with the main driving forces in your family who insist on Christmas, and talk out your feelings. Or do you just give in to the pressure, or, on the other hand, do you become the most giving, fun-loving, Christmas-spirited member of the family to show how Christians can have fun too?

"What would God want us to do?" is our obvious question, of course, and what would accomplish his purpose best at this time of year? But a second question is: Is it really joy people are experiencing?

I ask that, because Christmas for a Christian, despite obviously being the wrong time of year for Jesus' birthday, can be a great - and if not the best - opportunity all year to think about and figure out what Jesus meant when he said in **John 10:10**, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." Or as the King James phrases it, "**I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.**"

Well, that ties in with Christmas exactly, doesn't it? Isn't that the whole "spirit of Christmas" in a nutshell, that Christian and non-Christian alike are seeking joy at this time of year? And here's Jesus promising the same thing. He isn't talking about a "full, abundant life" at some time in the future either, because in **verse 9** he says, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved." He's talking in the present tense; whoever "enters," present tense. It all happens in this life now.

Jesus clearly isn't against us experiencing joy, then, and actually he wants us to. Three other verses in quick succession in John back that up as well: **John 15:11**, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." Then **John 16:24**, "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete," and **John 17:13**, "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them."

Joyful, abundant life is available to us now. But is Christmas the source of it? Or better put, can Christmas create it too? Or even better put, is what people are experiencing at Christmas-time **true joy**?

It depends, of course, on what one's definition of a joyful, abundant life is. If it's purely on the level of the fun and joy created by being together as family, joking, eating, drinking, exchanging gifts and putting up twinkly lights and decorating a tree, then, yes, many families love this time of year for the wonderful feeling of well-being and relaxation it creates. And for those who love singing carols and watching emotional movies on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and want that special atmosphere of Christmas that going to a packed church creates, there's a joy in that as well. And many people have found that doing little acts of kindness or feeding the poor at Christmas-time gives them warm feelings too.

So there are all sorts of "joys" being experienced at Christmas, but are they what Jesus was talking about in John 10:10? And if they aren't what was Jesus' definition of a full, abundant life instead? Well, let's go back to **John 10** and take a look.

Jesus starts off in **verses 1-3** with: “I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. The shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”

So what we’ve got so far is a picture of a sheep pen full of several flocks of sheep owned by different shepherds. A “watchman” oversees the pen at night, and he’s the one at the gate of the pen opening and closing it for the shepherds when they come to collect their sheep next morning. When someone leaps over the fence instead of entering by the gate he’s obviously up to no good; he’s trying to sneak in to steal some sheep instead. Only those entering through the gate are the true shepherds.

Jesus then adds the point in **verse 4** that the sheep follow the true shepherd “because they know his voice,” and in **verse 5** that they’ll “run away” from a stranger because they don’t recognize his voice.

So we’ve got true and false shepherds being compared here, and the sheep recognizing who the true shepherds are. But what is Jesus getting at? Well, in context, he’s getting at the Pharisees who are clearly being spelled out as the false shepherds, because they were the “thieves and robbers” of **verse 1**. They’d robbed God’s law of its meaning and purpose by adding all sorts of totally unnecessary but obligated burdens on the people, and in their resistance to Jesus robbed the people of the truth of who he was.

And Jesus certainly made his feelings known about that back in **John 9:39**, when he said “For judgment I have come into the world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” He wanted to remove blindness not add to it by human traditions and self-righteous people like the Pharisees hiding the truth of who he was.

And that perfectly describes Christmas today, because Christmas has been robbed of its meaning by its share of false shepherds too, who’ve added all sorts of human traditions and obligated burdens on people that have reduced Christmas to the hectic confusing mess it is today, and blinded people to who Jesus is and what he came for.

And now we’re left with trying to pump life into a pagan-originated corpse we should have buried long ago. Because for the last century or so Christmas has been injected with all sorts of human traditions that have now made Santa Claus the god kids worship, and a tree the centre of attention, not Jesus.

Why we Christians put up with this - and even go along with it - I do not know, because Christmas is now a minefield for us that we had better step carefully through to not cause any blow-ups in our families, or with neighbours and with people at work, and even with fellow Christians too, who, like Christians in the past, either love Christmas or want it banned.

Fortunately, we haven't finished the story here in **John 10**, because Jesus continues in **verses 7-8**, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them."

Jesus compares himself to the gate in his analogy here. And what was the gate for? To protect the sheep. So in saying "all those before him were thieves and robbers," Jesus is saying they weren't the least bit interested in protecting the sheep. Instead, they wanted the sheep to leave their shepherd and follow them. But sheep don't naturally listen to a voice they don't recognize, so a thief needs to steal them, and that was the purpose of the gate, to protect the sheep from being stolen by false shepherds.

Which is exactly what Jesus says in **verse 9** when he says again that he is the gate, and "whoever enters through me will be saved." And by "saved" - in the context here - Jesus means "will be kept safe," or protected. So, when he's our gate we are guaranteed his protection from those who would try to steal us away for their own purposes.

Which sounds really, really good, because we live in a world that's full of thieves, who "come only to steal and kill and destroy," **verse 10**. And there's no better and more practical illustration of that in our world today than what Christmas has become. Blinded by the god of this world it has become a minefield. Everything we've thrown into Christmas to make it a time of joy and peace, and it's all blown up in our faces as just another time of exploitation by big corporations to make money, and to hell with the planet. And people are somehow able to excuse that in their minds because of the warm fuzzy feelings it gives them. But then in a flash it's all over and back to the grind and the pain, and the unsolvable problems, and children who've learnt nothing about what real abundant life is. No wonder so many of them get depressed in later years and turn on each other out of sheer frustration with life.

Well, Jesus not only offers protection from that, he also said back in **verse 9**, that his sheep "come in and go out, and find pasture." His sheep can move freely in any situation, and not be tied down by tradition, or the driving forces in this world that have a stranglehold on people.

I can't think of a better way of describing what Jesus meant by these two parts in verse 9 than the first four verses of **Psalm 23**, which are: "The Lord is my shepherd, so I have all my needs supplied. He leads me to green meadows and along peaceful streams. He renews my strength when I'm weak and he steers me along right paths....and even when I walk through the darkest valley I'm not afraid for he is always close beside me."

In other words, it doesn't matter what circumstances we find ourselves in because with Jesus as our Shepherd we'll always "find ourselves in good pasture." Christmas, meanwhile, has vast numbers of people thinking they're missing out if they don't get on the Christmas bandwagon, even if they hate it and can't afford it. So they go along with it, go into debt, stuff themselves with junk food, and go through the obligatory family rituals, none of which seem to have much more purpose than a momentary sense of selfish pleasure.

It is a tragedy what we've created in our ignorance and stupidity and resistance to God. But fortunately, and ever so fortunately, we have a second part to **John 10:10** as well that says, but "**I (Jesus) have come so that they may have life and have it to the full.**"

And what is the context of that? Well, so far it's been all about Jesus bringing a wonderful sense of security and freedom. It's about him being the "good shepherd," **verse 11**, who knows exactly how to make his sheep feel safe and free, no matter where they are or what circumstances they're in, because, as he says, "He lays down his life for his sheep."

Meaning, of course, that we have his full attention at all times, which is great, because if I find myself facing a tricky situation at Christmas-time he's totally willing to help me become "as wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove." He's right there beside us to steer us safely through the Christmas minefield so we don't cause any unnecessary blow-ups. He can also help us discern what's best in our situation: Do we join in, or don't we, and how much?

Jesus told his disciples that "All power in heaven and on earth is given unto me," **Matthew 28:18**. He also said, "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves," **Matthew 10:16**. So he's left us in this world as sheep in constant need of a shepherd, the goal being that trusting in him as our all-powerful and loving shepherd we feel utterly safe and free. We can move in and out of any situation, including dropping Christmas all together if needs be.

What a blessing, that we can safely and freely graze in any situation, and munch away content and settled.

So I now carry with me wherever I go the clue to an abundant, joy-filled life, the very thing people are aiming at and yearning for at this time of year.

But what can I do with it? Well, it made me think of the gift I can now give to Jesus, taking into account that the only gifts given in the true Christmas story were given to him, not to each other. Giving gifts to each other has also become a minefield at this time of year, because what do you give, will a person like it, who do you give gifts to and don't give gifts to, and does anyone actually need more stuff in this overstuffed world?

So, given the chance, what gift could I give to Jesus? Well, fortunately, in this very same chapter, **John 10**, Jesus himself gives us a clue what he'd probably love to receive, because in **verse 16** he talks about "**having other sheep**" who will also "listen to my voice" and look to him as their shepherd. Meaning there are other people out there in our communities right now who would love to be part of and receive what Jesus has given to us, because they too are his sheep and they too would recognize his voice if they heard it.

It would mean voicing what Jesus would like said to his sheep, then, right? But how I, or we, go about bringing that into reality I have no idea. I'm learning from others, however, that if you put the word out that you're interested in starting a group that would enjoy digging into Scripture, that people leap at the chance to join it.

And isn't that what we Christians are really after, that people come to know from Jesus' own voice in John 10 what truly constitutes a joy-filled, abundant life? It's his great gift to us, and our gift to him in sharing it with others.