THE REAL MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

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If we really want to get back to the origins of the festival, we should consider getting uproariously drunk in front of a blazing fire and celebrating the return of the sun.
Category: Observations

I originally posted this in 2017; but it is still relevant.

As usual, at this time of year, there has been a lot said about the need to get back to theÂ *realÂ* meaningÂ of Christmas and I have a bit of a problem with that. Who gets to define what the real meaning is?

Let me explain.

Take the word â€œniceâ€ , which today is a simple, rather meaningless adjective which means vaguely pleasant. At school, we were told not to use it in essays because there was always a better, more exact word which could be used. However, in the 13c the word actually meant foolish. It went through a whole series of evolutions in meaning before it came to have its current sense (read more). So what is the real meaning of nice? You canâ€™t define the sense of a word today by its etymology (something that critics of Bible translations would do well to remember). The meanings of words change over time.

By analogy, I would argue that the meaning of celebrations and festivals changes, too.

Christmas does not mean, today, what it meant fifty, one hundred or a thousand years ago. During that time our society has changed massively and so has the significance of Christmas (and all sorts of other festivals).

However, for argumentâ€™s sake, letâ€™s say we should get back to the original meaning of Christmas. Where does that leave us? Firstly, we have to deal with the issue that many of our Christmas traditions are not much over 150 years old â€“ what do we do about them?. Then there is the rather inconvenient fact that the early church didnâ€™t celebrate Christmas at all (it was first celebrated in the third century). Presumably, if we want to be really authentic, we would drop Christmas altogether. Then again, in these Northern climes, Christmas celebrations (and some older traditions) piggy-backed onto older pagan celebrations which occurred at the same time of year. If we really want to get back to the origins of the festival, we should consider getting uproariously drunk in front of a blazing fire and celebrating the return of the sun.

Today, Christmas means different things to different people; going home to see the family, watching the Queen on the telly, giving lots of gifts, receiving lots of gifts and so on. It strikes me as rather arrogant for religious people (like me) to turn round and tell them that theyâ€™ve got it all wrong

and that these things arenâ€™t really Christmas.

So whatâ€™s the point in all this?

Firstly, I donâ€™t think that Jesus needs Christmas. He is not diminished if people consider December 25 as a day to eat too much and to lie bloated in front of the TV rather than celebrating it as his birthday (which it almost certainly isnâ€™t, anyway). If you want to get excited about Jesus and the calendar, remember that Sunday is our traditional rest day because it is the day of his resurrection and there are more Sundays than Christmas days in the year. In fact, the whole basis of our calendar (BC/AD or BCE/CE) revolves around his life. Jesus is far bigger than Christmas.

Secondly, people need Jesus, they donâ€™t need better Christmas celebrations. This is simple, but it is very profound. It is an encounter with the living Christ that transforms people and it is our job to point people to him, not to try and make them follow Christian cultural norms. Expecting people who donâ€™t follow Jesus to centre their Christmas around him is doomed to failure.

I fully realise that Christmas offers excellent evangelistic opportunities and Iâ€™m all for Churches making the best of it. However, our job is to point people to Jesus, not to try and change the way they celebrate the holiday.

Our evangelism has to start off with a realistic view of the society we are living in and to present the message of Jesus within that culture.