

PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS by Ruth Grayson

'I hate, I despise your religious feasts.' (Amos 5: 21)

Christmas has become synonymous with everything that the church should be opposing. It has come to be equated with over-indulgence, over-spending, hyperactivity and stress. It is then followed, especially in this country (the UK), by a 'dead' period when there is very little to do and when many workers are forced to take a considerable proportion of their annual leave because their places of employment are closed. This period is associated with both physical and mental illness, a rise in the suicide rate, in debt, in stress, in domestic violence, family breakdown and marital separation. I believe that the church as a whole, and Christians individually, could do a great deal more than is being done to rectify this situation.

In fact, I believe that these problems may partially be attributable to the church. They originate from the way in which the western church has for centuries chosen to emphasise Advent – the four weeks prior to Christmas Day – rather than the older tradition of Twelfth Night, which focuses attention on the period following it and particularly on the manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles. And our observations of Advent treat those four weeks as a countdown to December 25th rather than as a period of preparation for the *second* coming of Christ, its other and equally scriptural meaning. When Advent was first observed around the 6th century, it was kept as a period of fasting in anticipation of Christ's return and not, as now, a period of increasingly frantic revelry.

The pattern of services and special events in churches throughout this country illustrates the imbalance in our Christmas celebrations. Churches tend to focus all their services on Christmas Day itself as a climax to the preceding four weeks. Starting with Advent Sunday, which usually falls around the end of November, they proceed to schedule in extra events such as carol services, concerts, children's pageants and parties as if there were no other opportunities for them. They are generally full for services on Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day. They are then usually half full, at best, until the end of the school holidays. Moreover, many churches lock their doors at noon on Christmas Day and do nothing further on a congregational level to mark Jesus' coming among us. This is theological nonsense. Christ's birth should be celebrated as a *beginning*, not as an end in itself. It would appear that for the church, Christmas has become the end of the Advent season rather than the start of a new era. And the way many churchgoers celebrate the rest of Christmas Day, disappearing into their own homes as soon as the service is over to open largely unnecessary and often expensive presents, and then to eat gluttonously behind closed doors, has become a travesty of the Gospel message and an obscenity in the eyes of a starving world.

It would not be difficult to change all this, and in doing so to make a stand against the frenetic commercialism that has totally engulfed our modern Christmases. It would be very easy to move some of our key church services to the period between Christmas and Epiphany, although this might mean breaking with recent traditions and disrupting holiday routines in some cases. If your church has a toy service, at which children bring gifts for others, the

scripturally correct time for this is the Sunday nearest Epiphany – when we celebrate the arrival of the 'wise men' with their gifts for the baby Jesus – and not a date before Christmas. It may be argued that many of the agencies that accept such gifts on behalf of deprived households would like to distribute them to their recipients in time for Christmas, but in fact experience shows that most need an ongoing supply of toys and games to dispense throughout the year. Does your church have a carol service? Could this be held *after* Christmas rather than before it? A carol service is an appropriate time to mark the Twelve Days of Christmas, from 'Silent Night' (Christmas Eve) to 'We Three Kings' (Epiphany). And carol singing in your local area could also take place after Christmas, to emphasise continuity in our celebrations rather than encouraging people to shop in time to the music.

It is of course important that individual clergy and other church staff, paid or voluntary, should have time off to be with their families; but this must not mean that the church shuts down. Church members could be encouraged to alternate with staff to ensure that there is always someone available to offer hospitality or counselling if needed. Could your church offer a shared lunch on Christmas Day itself and invite non-church members to it? Could your church hall be used for family games or videos on Boxing Day, so that people who would like to get out of their houses for a while have somewhere to go? This is the time when domestic tensions begin to increase, and the lack of facilities open to the public two days running at a dreary time of year is a key factor in that increase. And could your church, and organisations belonging to it or using church premises throughout the year, be encouraged to hold any of their usual pre-Christmas parties or other seasonal events either during the post-Christmas holiday period or later during January, a generally quiet month when a party to celebrate Jesus' being with us would actually be very appropriate? In the church year as currently constituted, we do very little to celebrate Jesus' life (as opposed to his birth, death and resurrection), and the period between Epiphany and Lent would seem a good time to put this right.

We also need to stop and consider our personal preparations for Christmas. In the midst of the annual round of shopping and card writing, how many of us ever pause to reflect on the purpose of it all? Or are we scared of being left off someone else's present or card list if we dare do anything different? Yes, Christmas is a time for giving. But it is definitely not a time for extravagant commercialism or for trying to satisfy people's personal wishes. The giving of *personal* presents should be confined to individuals' birthdays and other family occasions. Christmas should be a time for *social* giving – to our churches, to charitable organisations, to projects concerned with helping people less fortunate than ourselves in this country or overseas. Many charities, such as Christian Aid and Oxfam, now facilitate this by producing 'alternative giving' catalogues by means of which it is possible to make a donation to a specific project in an individual's name and in turn receive a card to give to that individual. After all, our giving at Christmas is supposed to represent both God's munificence to us

through the gift of his Son, and our giving back to him by denying ourselves and helping others.

Finally, we should reflect on what the New Testament itself tells us about Jesus' birth and particularly on the period preceding it. The answer is: very little. Other than the Annunciation (which presumably took place nine months beforehand), and the journey to Bethlehem when Mary was about to give birth, there is no 'build up' to the Nativity. We may indeed be placing undue significance on Christmas to the detriment of celebrating our Lord's life and work as well as his death and resurrection. Only one Gospel writer, St. Luke, actually discusses the Nativity in any detail. Christmas was not one of the original feast days of the early church, which observed Epiphany (Christ's 'manifestation'), Easter and Pentecost as its three main festivals. This is not to say that we should emulate our Puritan ancestors and not celebrate Christmas at all; but that our celebrations should be in proportion to those of other great Christian festivals and should certainly reflect both the poverty surrounding Jesus' birth and the complete sacrifice of heavenly kingship that accompanied it. In adopting an ancient pagan festival as the convenient but entirely spurious date for Christmas (there is astronomical evidence that the Star of Bethlehem appeared in the spring, not in December), we have allowed the world to change the meaning of the event. In fact, it is the event that is meant to change the world. Sadly, our Christmas celebrations appear to contradict the basic message of the Gospel and need to be urgently reconsidered.

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