

SO WHAT IS CHRISTMAS ALL ABOUT?

The First World War began in August 1914, and by the time it had ended entire cultures had changed drastically, countries' borders had moved back and forth several times and millions of people's lives had been altered forever. Within only a few months of the start of the war, the embattled sides had settled into a system of trench warfare based on a strategy of attrition (where the last man standing 'won'), and the war trudged on for 4 remorseless years.

In contrast to the brutality of the First World War, the story is told that on Christmas Day, 1914, a soldier popped his head over the top of his trench and looked out across no man's land. Rather than throw a few grenades across the field of death littered with barbed wire, he instead tossed a couple of tins of corned beef into his enemy's trench, knowing that both sides of the war lacked most of life's basic essentials and were nearly always hungry. Within a minute or so, a dull thud in the soil next to him sounded the arrival of a packet of coffee and some sweets, courtesy of 'the other side'.

Cautiously, men began to emerge from out of the relative safety of their mud coffins. Within a short while jokes were being translated from German into English and vice versa, food was pooled together for a Christmas dinner, cards were produced on makeshift tables and, finally, a game of football was being played between the two warring armies, amid shouts of delight and good humoured rivalry. The day ended with handshakes, smiles and even prayers for each other.

On 26 December the commanding authorities on both sides outlawed any repetition of this event under pain of death, and the slaughter began again in earnest. The ray of hope was wiped from the war experience, and most of the participants of that event would be dead within a year.

This is certainly a remarkable episode in military history and a marvellous story of kindness and goodwill within a terrible situation. But why did this happen, and why on a Christmas Day? Does this story tell us all we need to know? Are hope in the darkness and the triumph of the human spirit the sum total of the meaning of Christmas? And, today, where does that view of Christmas fit in with presents, debt, Christmas trees, feasting, debt, depression, old films, and . . . debt?

Different Views

If you were to ask people about the meaning of Christmas, certainly many would sum it up in ways similar to the story above. Christmas is about being kind and caring, about doing good and looking out for each other and about setting aside our differences (at least for a while).

The Bible, however, describes the meaning of Christmas in an entirely different way. It tells the story of Jesus coming into the world. According to the teachings of Christianity, the overwhelming point of Christmas is that it is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. When Jesus was born, the event was pronounced to be a time of "peace on earth, and goodwill towards men"—which sounds like the message of those trenches! So how do the two ideas of peace and goodwill meet and what relevance, if any, do they have for us today?

Broken Relationships

To begin with, peace and goodwill are the hallmarks of friendship. But friendship is a relationship, and when friends fall out, that relationship is broken. For some reason, one or both of the sides do not honour their part of the relationship, or they feel that their expectations or needs have been overlooked or abused. When this happens, what was once a relationship of trust can become a relationship of mistrust, fear and hostility. Two sides at war—enemies; when before, they had been friends.

How can that broken relationship be restored? In the case of the First World War, it was perceived that one side was the aggressor and the other side needed to defeat that side militarily, push them back to their original borders and convince them by means of force that what they had done was wrong and must not be repeated. The aggressors, however, were not listening and believed they had a right to pursue their own interests. This resulted in a deadlock and the war continued until, both sides exhausted, one finally gave way and peace was restored.

That peace, however, lasted only 20 years before the whole thing started again. Why? To put it simply, the relationship—the friendship based on trust—had not been put back to what it had once been. All that had happened was that one side had managed to subdue the other for 20 years. Nothing had really changed at the root of the issue, so the relationship had remained broken. The wrongdoing that was at the root of the breakdown in the first place was still preventing the two sides from getting back together. This

reflects a reality at the deepest part of man's being. Human beings (let us be brutally honest) are deeply selfish and therefore want the best for themselves first and foremost. With this 'default' position, the pursuit of self-interest will inevitably result in conflict. Moreover, it will always produce a cycle of conflict after conflict, continually fed by selfish ambition.

Restoration Needed

The Bible tells us that, long before the birth of Jesus Christ, this selfishness first showed itself when mankind decided to disobey the God who had created them and 'go it alone'. Humanity's strong desire to live life on our own terms broke the relationship with God and, in the words of the Bible, we "died". This was not an immediate, physical death, but an inevitable certainty of death brought on by the decay of time and the effects of wrongdoing (which the Bible calls sin). So, having been made in God's image and destined to enjoy the friendship and care of God forever, humanity, through selfish rebellion, suddenly became dying creatures. The human race was now destined to suffer the effects of being outside the constant protection and intimate friendship of our Creator. Moreover, since God had given humans authority over the earth, the poor decisions of Adam and Eve (the first people) affected both their own personal lives and the world itself. Today, the same kinds of choices that ruined humanity's perfect relationship with God so long ago continue to be repeated by all of us in our own ways—with similarly destructive consequences.

At this point some might assume that, since it was humanity that severed the bond of friendship, then it must surely be humanity's job to put things right—to make amends. In our day to day life this is certainly what would be expected: The one at fault must put things right. But this is our dilemma: How could flawed creatures like human beings, with all of our selfish desires, possibly put right a problem with the infinite Creator God we have disobeyed? How can mere mortals repair all of the things we have done to cause that relationship to be broken? It is impossible.

Jesus Arrives

Enter Christmas. Or more precisely, enter Jesus at Christmas time. Christmas is the beginning of God's answer to this problem.

God knows that mankind cannot make peace with Him—no matter how hard we try. Put another way, the only way to restore the friendship is to make it as if mankind had never got it wrong in the first place. And, again, this is impossible for us to accomplish.

So God sent His Son to do the job instead. In the familiar Christmas story, angels appeared to shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth and declared, "Peace on earth, and goodwill towards men". This is an offer of true peace that lasts forever. This is not the peace that ends all wars between nations or individuals. It is the peace that means mankind and God no longer must be separated from each other. God has offered the solution to our human problem—to our mistakes—because we can never fix it ourselves. Jesus entering the world is like the first expression of love, concern and compassion

sent from that muddy trench on Christmas Day 1914. But Jesus went even further.

By entering the world as a helpless baby, Jesus, God's Son, stepped down into a messed up world in order to give everyone the chance to get right again with God—to get back into the relationship that was broken when humanity decided to go it alone. Rather than us having to try to claw our way back into God's good favour, God freely offered the way back by stepping down to our level in order to lift us back up to Himself.

The arrival of Jesus into the world brought with it His plan to live a perfect life on earth, to show humanity the way back to God the Father and ultimately to die in order to pay the price for all of our selfishness, pride and wrongdoing. He made the way for the trenches of our failure to be wiped away and for all those who were dead and dying to live again—forever.

That is what Christians celebrate at Christmas: The arrival of real peace on earth and the goodwill of God Himself towards a race that was, by its own deliberate choice, His enemy. The arrival of Jesus showed that God still loved us and made a way for us to get right again and live forever with Him. For Christians, that goes so much further than festive meals, sharing presents and hoping against hope that the world will somehow be a better place next year.

Peace Is Available

On Christmas Day 1914, someone, whose name has been lost to history, decided to make the first move to restore a relationship that had been horribly and bloodily broken by the trauma of the

Western Front. Others followed his example, and friendship and affection reigned at least for one day. It was more than most had believed possible.

For Christians the true meaning of Christmas is that Jesus stepped down from the glory of heaven to become a man, endure all that living in the 'mud and trenches' of a broken world could throw at Him and then pay the price for all the things that the human race—individually and corporately—has ever done that has made the world the imperfect place it is. The difference between His decision and that of the man in the trenches is that Jesus' solution can last forever, not merely for a single day.

The true message of Christmas then is that, because Jesus came to save people from their sins, all those who put their trust in Him can be once more put right with God and enjoy a living, meaningful and vibrant friendship with Him, eventually culminating in everlasting life with Him in heaven. Now that's a gift to be celebrated!

Maybe you now understand for the first time your broken relationship with God and the incredible things He has done for you, and sincerely would like to put things right with Him.

As with all relationships that have been broken, we begin to restore them by admitting the problems we have caused and genuinely saying we are sorry. If we want to put right our relationship with God, then we have to begin by sincerely telling Him we are sorry for our wrong choices and rebellious self-interest and how grateful we are for all He has done to show His love for us. If you would like to do this, then you might want to use your own words, or use a prayer like this:

Dear God,

I am deeply sorry for all the ways in which I've tried to build my life without You, the very centre of the universe. Thank You so much that You love me in spite of my sin. Thank You that You sent Jesus to die for the sake of my sin and to give me a relationship with You. Please help me to live for You with my whole life from this day forward.

If you really mean those words, then you have started on a journey with God. It's only the first step, and it won't always be an easy path. There are things that you will continue to struggle with and fail at, but the difference is that now you are not alone. He will help you and guide you. When you are in relationship with Him you become like a new person—not a perfect person, but a new and forgiven one.

You can read more in the Bible about how God loves us through Jesus Christ. Our Daily Bread Ministries produces Bible based resources that can help you think about your new life in Him and help you trust Him more each day. If you would like to receive some introductory material, please contact your nearest Our Daily Bread Ministries office (on the back of this booklet).

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