

What really matters about Christmas?

Some years ago, when a Bishop's doubts about the virgin birth of Jesus hit the headlines, a clergyman was interviewed on the BBC's 'Breakfast Time' programme about what it all meant. The interviewer, a well known TV personality with very little time for Christianity, had one great objection to what the Bishop was saying. He put it in the form of a question to the clergyman: "If Jesus wasn't born to the Virgin Mary does that mean we'll have to stop sending Christmas cards and giving presents?"

It might sound a stupid question, but it actually highlights an important issue. For this BBC presenter, as for many others in Britain today, what really matters about Christmas is the cards and the presents. If Jesus wasn't really born as the Bible says, that would be a nuisance - but only because it would take away the justification for the ways in which we celebrate his birth! It might even mean one or two bank holidays less.

In fact if Jesus hadn't been born as the Bible says the implications would be much more serious. It would mean that God has not come into this world to put right what we have spoilt. It would mean that we have no way of getting to know God. It would mean that we have no chance of anything but judgment and condemnation when we die.

Christmas is worth celebrating, not as an excuse for cards or presents or holidays, but because Christmas assures us that God hasn't written us off - that he loves us and has a plan for us. At Good Friday and Easter we see that Jesus has dealt with our twin problems of sin and death. At Pentecost we find that the new life achieved by Jesus can be ours as well.

Is Christmas important to you? If so, why? Just for the trappings of cards, presents and holidays, or for what it really means? May this Christmas be a time when you receive the gift that matters: God's Son as your Saviour.

What's so 'happy' about Christmas?

Many people won't have a happy Christmas this year. And they are not just the famine victims and the hurricane victims and the earthquake victims and refugees in far-off countries, or those who sleep rough in most British cities and towns, or even people who 'live' in hostels or bed-and-breakfast accommodation. These unhappy people will include many 'ordinary' English people who have enough food and a roof over their heads.

Traditionally there have been strong pressures on us all to enjoy Christmas as a family occasion. Over recent years it has become more of a television time. This is rapidly altering Christmas-time in our pleasure-seeking society into a party opportunity. But those without families, or with family pains and pressures, or with recent bereavement, can find Christmas one of the worst times of year.

Many are realising the emptiness of television (Christmas viewing figures keep falling, even including satellite and cable channels). And those who cannot cope with parties and bonhomie feel left out and lonely.

Isn't it time that we re-evaluated how to celebrate, how to enjoy ourselves? No one is against families or parties, and television brings us real benefits. This is not even a plea to put Jesus Christ or religion back into Christmas (though a trip to church and a reading of the opening