

## REFLECTIONS

# Keeping Christ in Christmas

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I come from a family that wasn't a regular church going family. I can't recall going to church much before I turned 20. There were occasional services at Christmas and Easter and a few other occasions. My parents explored aspects of Christianity but by the end of their lives they were believers in God but not convinced of the teachings about Jesus.

When we were younger we did celebrate Christmas as a family with a feast and sharing presents. There were Christmas stockings, an Advent Calendar, a Christmas tree and other decorations. Our family was influenced by a culture that celebrated the Christmas story. Having been born in England, my earliest Christmas memories include dark skies, snow, and a walk to a village church.

A few years ago when my wife, children and I were in Europe in December I felt at home at Christmas, even though I had been in Australia for the vast majority of my life. The way we celebrate Christmas is very English/European and reflects the northern hemisphere. It represented my childhood and felt very familiar.

One of the massive distinctions between the northern and southern hemispheres is that in the south, not only are we preparing for Christmas in December, we are also preparing for our summer holidays and long break. December is marked by the mad rush to get things done so that we can close down and escape from the ordinary for a few weeks. In the north, after two days people are back at work. The festival of Christmas is a brief break from the ordinary routines in the north whereas for us it can be the start of the long summer holiday. All of these reflections are a long way of saying that much of Christmas celebration is cultural and a lot of it includes traditions from cultures shaped in a different context.

The marking of Christmas in northern hemisphere and European communities is not static. People in those lands are seeking to understand whether there are some public practices they observe that are more respectful to citizens of a different faith or no faith. Christians and public leaders wonder how to best recognise the centuries-old story that has shaped their culture and is affirmed by many citizens while also looking at how to build meaningful, caring communities where people may hold a range of theological and philosophical views.

**As I think about all of this, a few thoughts come to mind –**

- The heart of the Christmas story is that God loved all that He had made with such an intensity that he became part of it so that he might draw all of it towards His nature of goodness, justice, mercy, peace, reconciliation and love. That's a 365 day invitation to become like God and behave in a more godlike way!
- In the public spaces of our churches and our homes it's good to tell the story that shapes us. I'm glad when in the shared public spaces of our community we can mark that it's a time of festival even if the decorations are more restrained than in our churches or homes. We still have many opportunities of telling people why it's important to us and many, many thousands of people will still hum Christmas carols.
- For some people greetings like "Merry Christmas" are an unwelcome disturbance. The words are dissonant and rather than provoking a sense of warmth and relationship sound, in their ears, like something else. To all people and especially to such as them I am happy to use Christ's greeting in the Upper Room - "Peace" – shalom, salaam, shanti; a word of the common space – a word of hope.
- The greatest witness to the Christian faith is Christians acting in a Christlike manner – loving God, showing love for one another and showing love to others.

I haven't yet worked out what an authentic southern hemisphere celebration of Christmas might look like. Maybe given that we are such a cosmopolitan community it is simply meant to be a diverse blend of traditions in the warmth. Our community is enriched by the rest, touched by giving, reminded of peace, called to joy and pointed to love. These are good things!

May Christ, who embodied God's overwhelming love for the cosmos, gladden your heart and give you peace.

+Peter

**Want to Keep Christ in Christmas?**

**Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, forgive the guilty,  
welcome the stranger and the unwanted child, care for the  
sick, love your enemies.**

- Unknown