

## What is Christmas really all about?

I have mixed feelings about the Christmas season. Partly that's due to my work, that keeps me busy right up to the day itself. And partly it's due to the mixed messages that this season presents to me.

Advent and Christmas are clearly about the coming of God into the world in a whole new way – as a child of innocence, yet a child who will grow to be someone who inspires a world-changing movement that we now call Christianity. That's easy to assert, maybe even easy to believe, but what does it mean, in the real world of day-to-day?

It ought to mean that we and others are ready for that world-changing God-presence. It ought to mean that we too are ready to be changed, to be transformed, away from what and who we are, toward people who are different, more God-inspired, even God-possessed. But is that true? Are we indeed ready for that? Mostly, I suspect not. After all, who wants to be changed beyond recognition? Who is ready to become that ideal person – a true and complete disciple of Jesus, willing to give up everything I value in order to follow him? Not me, and I expect not you either.

So Advent and Christmas set for us a challenge that is pretty hard to take. We are expected to be filled with joy at the coming of Jesus the child, yet we also shy away from fully accepting what that means.

Of course, a more obvious mixed message of the season is the contrast between its sacred nature in our faith, and its commercial nature in madly trying to buy our way into the affections of others. OK, OK ... gift giving may well have purer motives than that. We may be sincerely trying to offer someone close to us a gift in its purest sense – something that they will truly value as a sign of our love and care. Yet it's so easy to go overboard with this, getting caught up in over-doing it and buying far more than this purer motive would need. If one gift is good, then two is even better, and a stronger sign of our affection. And after all, consumerism is a good thing for the retail world, right? All those people need those jobs in the stores, and all those small business owners need what we give them, right. See how complicated all this can get?

Still, out of it all I wouldn't ever want to give up Christmas. Even with all its mixed messages and difficult comparisons, it's a season that can bring out some of the best in people, perhaps in me too. We are more generous. We attend to our friendships and family connections more carefully. We see the disparities and inequities in our society more clearly. We connect with social support programs and agencies more intentionally. We think about life's fuller meaning a bit more deeply. We, and others, connect more with one of the core stories of our faith, the story of God's entry into the world with .

So Christmas, and the Advent season that precedes it, invites us to be more human and humane. We indeed are better people during this season. And maybe some of that carries on for a while afterwards. Maybe Christmas isn't just a special day, but is more completely a way of living, a way we can choose to live, a way which we get to practice at this time of year.

So let's practice that Christmas life, and carry it one for a while. Oh, sure, we'll need a refresher now and then. Christmas happens every year, so we at least get an annual chance to practice and renew our commitment to that way of living. Let's do Christmas really well!

Blessings for this season of newness,