

By this time in the Christmas season, even though, yes it isn't yet Christmas it's still Advent, but by this time in what is to everybody apart from a few die-hard liturgical Puritans, the Christmas Season, you will have heard quite enough of it. I don't mean Away in a Manger (first verse only), though quite possibly you have had quite enough of the only vaguely religious Christmas carol anybody knows any more. You may have had enough of Jingle Bells or Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer or any other inane jangle that blares and bleats from every radio and shop speaker, but that's not what I mean. I mean that you will have heard quite enough by now of a chorus of a different kind, that chorus of complaints (what else?) that Christmas has become too commercial. It's all about shopping now. When I was a child our only Christmas present was an orange. That was my dad. As he was from Yorkshire such a comment would be answered with "You were lucky, we only had the peel. A bit of cast off peel. That the dog had already eaten and then vomited back again. Aya, those were t'days. We've lost the true meaning of Christmas.

It's become a truism, a cliché almost, just another of those things we moan about almost as a reflex, because where would we be without a good moan, the day I stop complaining is the day I die. One of the problems with truisms, particularly those pedalled in the Daily Mail and the like, is, well, they're not always true.

So true or false? Let's put on our deerstalkers or our lab coats- pick your investigative cliché. Let's grab our magnifying glasses and have a long close look at this particular old chestnut roasting on the open fire at Christmas. Let's put under the brightest fairy light- got lots of those- the notion that our world has lost the true meaning of Christmas, that we are somehow, doing it wrong now, we've got the wrong end of the stick and are doggedly refusing to let go; it's all gone too far and we've forgotten what it's really all about.

Listening today we're reasonably well qualified to evaluate that suggestion. All considered, you've read some, maybe all, of your bible; you've received one or more of the sacraments of the church, or at least been present when they've happened; you've experienced God's presence even if you didn't recognise it as such at the time, perhaps in some indefinable way, in worship, in prayer, in church. We're all Christians here, so we should feel no qualms about asking the question, are we doing Christmas wrong?

Big question. Rather than have us reinvent the wheel, I think we can cut some corners and help things along, I think we can cut straight to the chase, because I

think our enquiry boils down to one question: Does God want you to be happy? I think he does. And that's not because I'm a naturally kindly, smiley, happy-go-lucky sort of guy and I think that God wants what I want. I'm not, and I don't. You'd know that if you'd met me out on one of my lockdown walks. I think God wants you to be happy because that's precisely where our scriptures point us: God wants us to be happy. We can be very good at trying to use our Bible to make ourselves, and most often somebody else, unhappy: but that's just us. It ain't what God intended.

Yes sometimes you can glance around a church and everybody seems to be wearing the face of gloom, but then people in ecstasy do sometimes look like somebody's just slammed the piano lid down on their fingers. That's my explanation and I'm sticking to it. God wants us to be happy.

God so loved the world, that he sent his only Son
To make us miserable? I think not.

So, our secular Christmas that we sit in judgement on today. The parties (socially distanced), the presents, the lights and decorations, the 1001 ways of over-indulging, santas and robins and reindeer and snowmen. It may not always succeed, but it is there with the intention of happiness: whether it is yours or someone else's. Surely that can only be a good thing? Camp, commercial, trashy, tasteless: a reflection of humanity everywhere, but humanity trying to be happy. Surely that can only be a good thing? And although we may think that the Christ child has disappeared from this, he hasn't. Somewhere under all the glitz and glitter he is still there. You can't take Christ out of Christmas: take him out and you've just got 'mas' and who wants to celebrate that? Perhaps, instead of sniping on the sidelines or feeling smug & superior Christians should be encouraging the urge to celebrate Christmas, however it may manifest. We're celebrating: so are you. Though I think we have to draw the line somewhere, and that somewhere is Cliff Richard.

Look. Yes, the supermarkets are trying to make us spend all our money at Christmas, but then when are they not trying to pick our pockets and empty our wallets? Just as it's in the nature of a dog to try to reduce everything to a chewed up saliva-soaked sticky mess, it's in the nature of any commercial enterprise to attempt to commercialise everything. I'm sure you could have argued that the greengrocers of yore were just crass commercialists when they sold austerity mums the oranges. And even Dickens's Scrooge was just a victim of capitalist propaganda when he presented the Cratchits with their prize Christmas turkey.

Our world is soaked and saturated with commercialism and, whether that is a good thing or not, I don't think we can be too judgemental if – inevitably– it determines the way we celebrate. We don't know any other way to do it, but at least we *are* doing it.

One caveat here. If we say 'God wants us to be happy' this is not a justification for hedonism. 'God wants us to be happy', therefore, eat drink, sleep around. When Jesus said

'I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly',

he probably didn't have Gateshead on a Saturday night in mind.

A few years back it was reported that scientists had distinguished two distinct ways a dog can wag its tail. You have to look really closely to tell, and presumably it helps if you being paid a research grant to look in the first place, but a happy dog wags its tail slightly to the right, and an anxious dog, to the left. You have to look really closely. I tried it on my dog, but as far as I could tell he was neither happy nor anxious, merely insane. The point is, it's difficult to tell a happy dog from an anxious dog just by looking at the tail: to all intents and purposes it looks like the same thing, a wagging tail.

In a similar way, it is very easy to mistake the pleasures of hedonism for happiness: they can often, superficially, look like the same thing. God wants you to be happy, but this is not an invitation to hedonism, because hedonism does not make you happy. Alcoholics, drug addicts, sexual compulsives are not happy. Of course not every hedonist ends up quite so far down that desolate road, but the existence of such problems does point to the futility of the apparent solutions. Whatever pleasures those chosen poisons once gave has gone. That's a dead end road. The good news is that God wants you to be happy. Not like that. It doesn't work. But, let's say it again, he does want you to be happy.

Christmas 21st century style. Gaudy. Tacky. Often lacking any discernible taste. Commercialised. But there, in its rather twisted way, for your happiness. And after all, one last time, God wants you to be happy.

So have a happy christmas, with all the trimmings. God likes a good party.