

## When Christmas isn't merry

One of the pastors at my church often reminds us that, while Christmas is a time of great rejoicing when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, it is also a time when the lonely are lonelier and the poor are poorer. I recently found a few great articles talking about the fact that Christmas needn't be merry to be meaningful.

This time of year is not called the silly season for nothing. It is easy to forget that it is not Christmas that we celebrate, but the Christ of Christmas. While the consumerist madness that marks this time of year is shown by the fact that the average Australian will spend \$826 on Christmas presents, a 2006 study produced by the United Nations Development Institute found that 2 per cent of adults in the world have more than half the world's wealth and the poorest 50 per cent of people have 1 per cent of global wealth. On top of that, a publication by Professor Mirko Bagaric, of the Deakin law school, called 'How to Live: Being Happy and Dealing with Moral Dilemmas' shows that the things that are conducive to happiness are such things as (not necessarily in order) realistic goals, optimism, a sense of control, close relationships, challenging work and active leisure, punctuated by adequate rest and a faith that entails communal support, purpose and acceptance.

As we may stress over what to buy for our families for Christmas, consider that there are better options available. Why not try the TEAR Really Useful Gift Catalogue, the World Vision Smiles Catalogue or the Oxfam catalogue? These are ways of giving to the world's poor this Christmas and also recognising your loved ones.

This Christmas we remember that Jesus was also born into poverty. He was born in an occupied third world country in the Middle East. He was born to an unwed mother, not in a palace or a hospital, but in a barn. Jesus' birth was first announced to simple labourers who were herding someone else's sheep. Soon after his birth he was the target of genocide and he was forced to flee as a refugee to Egypt.

The poor, the oppressed and the broken – Christ's birth embraces such as these. The central message of Christmas is that Jesus came for us all. No one is excluded. The story of Christmas challenges us to embrace the poor as Jesus did.

God also experienced empty arms by sending his son who was born to die in order to bring life to us, the broken ones. Like Mary, we have the opportunity to cherish and ponder these things in our hearts. As we do this we might just find that the unhappiness that threatens to diminish the meaning of Christmas enhances it instead.

### Tips for a meaningful Christmas

- Be attentive and open. Christ may want to visit you and bring you real joy, but you might be too busy to experience God's embrace.
- Reconcile and forgive those who have wronged you. While our hearts are filled with anger and resentment, the love of God cannot enter. Let's take advantage of God's embrace, so we can be free.
- Do something that costs you something. It can be something nice, it can be something strange. For example, there are many homeless people throughout the world who never get to talk to someone. There may be an opportunity to be the vehicle of God's grace, even just by talking.
- Finally, stand for peace and justice. Christ is the prince of peace. He invited us to put his kingdom first. As we dream for the new world, we need to work towards it.

May God bless you and give you a meaningful Christmas.

*Most of the above article is from different pieces by RBC Ministries and Dean Hirsch, World Vision International President.*

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