

Dear Friends,

Happy Christmas! We all say it. But do we really know what it means? Or has it become a safe, seasonal version of: Have a nice day? Let's take a closer look. The "Happy" part is easy. Who doesn't want to be cheery, particularly as winter sets in, plus, of course, the unsettled life we have all been living with during the past two years. Christmas... that's where the meaning gets trickier. It's obviously a reference to Christ. But it has a deeper meaning. The Old English origin is Cristemaesse... a reference to the mass. So a Happy Christmas was a wish for a joyful Eucharistic celebration as the focal point of the day. Going a step further, the word mass has its origins in the Latin...missa... the same root as the word "mission." And that is Christ's constant charge to us, to go forth, to be on a mission, his mission.

So with our focus on the origins and meaning of the day, Christians have to wonder: What transformed the Nativity, our remembrance of Christ's birth, into an occasion to spend too much, eat too much and drink too much? How has God's initial act of our redemption come to be celebrated by retail riots on Black Friday? We could blame it on the pagans... both the contemporary ones and the ancient ones. Like so many of our traditions, the timing of the yule season was originally a pagan festival borrowed by the early Christians. So you might say that it's only going back to its origins.

Has all the overexcited reaction to Christmas added to the glory of God? Is Christ honoured by the commercial revelry that surrounds Christmas? If the pagans have re-emerged to take back their own, who cares? Is it no great loss? This Christmas, let's refocus our attention on where it belongs, on the birth of Christ; and let the tinsel and fairy lights fall where they may.

Luke's beautiful account is so familiar and so straightforward that our time here is better spent searching the significance of the event. Of all the wonders recorded by scripture, the singular significance of the Nativity is that in those unlikely circumstances God chose to become man, while remaining God. Let that sink in for a moment.

The God, so awesome that the ancient Hebrews would not even whisper his name, is suddenly among us. Emanuel has come and he's so much more than anyone could have expected. To save us, to shake us of our self-indulgence, to atone for every sin that ever was or will be... the love of God was made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. And through him we are reconciled with God. We have a unique window into his purpose, an open channel for his love.

Even before the child Jesus could speak, the circumstance of his birth was his first sermon to us. Laid in a manger, surrounded by shepherds, God is telling us that his New Covenant will not be based on power and hierarchy. It will be based on service and sacrifice. The new standard will be love and humility, rather than micro-management of human behaviour.

In this context, our challenge is not to keep Christ in Christmas. He's not a seasonal ornament that we want included along with all the others. Christ isn't "in" Christmas. Christ is Christmas. And his Nativity is integral to who he is. In the person of Jesus, God became like us, so that we could become more like him. Christmas is not an end in itself. It is a beginning, an initial event. Stripped of its Christian context, you might as well call it "The Holidays," or more accurately: "The Year End Grand Sale and Over-Indulgence Festival."

With all that said, nothing is bigger than the heart of Jesus. He wants us to be happy. So let's deck the halls. Let's trim the tree. Let's hang the stockings. Yes, folk will sing "White Christmas" right along with the carols. But first last and always, let's remember the reason for the season, the joy of Christmas is in the miracle, not in the material, it's in the mystery, not in the myths. The love of God is alive and among us, so that every year we can celebrate anew, Jesus Christ is born today.

Every Blessing

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Pauline". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.