

Christmas—but what about Jesus?

What do you associate with Christmas?

For many people Christmas is mainly a family celebration. It is a day when the whole family is gathered and has a sense of togetherness. Childhood memories are evoked: gifts and carols around the Christmas tree, turkey and Christmas pudding. In reality, who is free from the stress of preparation? Usually there is no time at all to think deeply about what would really make others happy. Instead, people are under a lot of pressure, trying not to forget to send anyone Christmas cards and New Year's greetings and making sure they buy all the presents in time.¹

Preparing the festive meal, cleaning the house etc. – there is so much work to do. Some people, of course, do take time for some contemplative hours, attending Christmas concerts, baking cakes, making hand-made Christmas decorations and gifts etc. – but what is it really all for?

As is visible from the name (Christmas = Christ-mass) people originally intended to honour Jesus Christ with this holiday. The question is, however, whether the New Testament teaches us to celebrate Christ's birth with a special festival? If not we have to reject it as something unchristian.

The Gospels do not specify when Jesus was born.

Jesus was certainly not born in winter, neither in December nor in January. There were shepherds with their flocks in the field at night (Luke 2:8). Although it is true that in Palestine the winters are warmer than in Europe, yet from the end of October, it is so cold outside that the sheep are kept in a stable. From the words of Jesus it is also visible that the winters in Palestine were quite cold:

But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath. (Matthew 24:20)

It is also improbable that the census Mary and Josef were responding to, which required whole families with pregnant women or little children to travel back to their place of birth, was held in winter of all seasons.

Christmas on 25th December was not celebrated at all by Christians in the first few centuries AD.

The cult of Mithra, the sun-god, was the most widespread religion in the pagan Roman Empire. Its main holiday was the feast of the winter solstice on 25th December as the birth of the Sun. Even before the introduction of the Mithraic Religion, Roman Emperors dedicated temples to "Sol Invictus" (the unconquerable Sun god) and celebrated the victory of the new rising Sun.

Jesus Christ spoke of himself as the "Light of the world" (John 8:12), and is worshipped as such by Christians – yet without a feast!

Emperor Constantine the Great's (285-337) desire was to consciously use elements of Christianity to strengthen the pagan Roman Empire. He succeeded in redefining the existing celebration of Sun worship as the festival of Christ's birth.²

Statements of certain influential personalities in Church history clearly assure us of the pagan background of this holiday. For example, the Church Father Ambrosius said, "Christ is our new Sun". Augustine ordered people not to worship the Sun on this day, like the pagans, but rather to worship the one who created the sun. Leo the Great criticised some people for celebrating the birth of the Sun instead of Jesus on Christmas.

How does Jesus want us to express our joy over His coming?

It is quite natural to want to express our joy and thankfulness about the fact that God became man in Jesus, but we have to ask the question in which way Jesus wants us to do this. In the Bible we do not find the slightest hint that this should be done in a special form or on a specific day. Such things are actually quite sharply rejected (Galatians 4:8-11 and Colossians 2:16-17).

Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. (John 14:23)

Our love for Jesus is expressed through our daily relationship with Him, earnestly seeking to know and practise His will in our own lives.

And He was saying to them all, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself? (Luke 9:23-25)

Our aim is not to reform the Christmas tradition but to invite you to embrace true Christianity. Will you accept this invitation? We would like to follow Christ together with you.

God’s greatest gift of love to us was Jesus, who came to “seek and save the lost”. He offers us the greatest gift – eternal life – and wants to teach us love, forgiveness, joy and peace. What do you think about this precious gift?

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

Footnotes:

1. We do not want to criticise the wish to give one another presents – but it is Jesus who should be in the centre. The wise men from the East did not give presents to each other but to Jesus (Matthew 2:11). What can be more precious than giving ourselves? *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.* (Romans 12:1-2)
2. “Constantine... continued to support the Sun worship throughout his life. He erected two statues of himself, depicted as the Sun-god in (shining) radiance. He affixed the following inscription to their pedestals: ‘To Constantine, the one shining like Helios’. It is certainly Constantine’s intention to combine Sun-worship with the worship of Christ, thanks to the existing Christ-Sun symbolism.” Oscar Cullmann, *Der Ursprung des Weihnachtsfestes* (The Origin of The Christmas Festival) Zürich 1960, Zwingli Verlag Zürich/Stuttgart, page 28.

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