

## Talk

I wonder if any of you have come across any of those 'all year round' Christmas shops. I first came across them springing up some years ago in downtown shopping malls in America, and it seems the trend has made its way to this side of the Pond. Because, lo and behold, there's even a 'Ye Olde Christmas Shoppe' that's appeared on the historic Royal Mile in Edinburgh. Now you can purchase all your decorations for the festive season during the height of summer when the temperature is 25C. No longer do we need to simply *wish* it could be Christmas every day - now we've got shops like this where it really *is* Christmas every day – or at least *their* take on it!

I would like to suggest this afternoon, though, that when we get to grips with the *real* message of Christmas, we discover that it has profound implications, *not* just for the festive season, but for the *whole* of our lives, all year round, 24/7 – and indeed, beyond that, into eternity.

In fact, Christmas touches upon some of the biggest questions of life: 'What's it all about?' 'Is there any meaning to it all?', 'Why *is* the world in such a mess?', 'How do I know God exists, and if he does exist, how can I come to *know* him?' When we reflect upon the various readings from the Bible we've been hearing today, and the familiar words of some of the carols we've been singing, we begin to see the answers to these key questions of life emerging.

We started out with a reading from the beginning of the Bible - from the book of Genesis – where we're reminded that as human beings, from the very beginning, we have been disobedient to the God who made us. We have constantly turned away from God and we've sought to go our *own* way. We have well and truly messed up. And so today we continue to see the consequences of our rebelliousness - all the evil we see in our world, in our communities and in our own lives.

And so, at that first Christmastide, God came to us in the form of a baby,

to save us from our sin - all our wrongdoing - and to bring us back to him. Through Jesus, born for us at Christmas, we can know God personally. The thing is, we tend to like to celebrate the baby Jesus lying in a manger at *Christmas*, but then we shut Jesus away for the rest of the year, as though he has no relevance to us in our day-to-day lives. But the story doesn't simply begin and end at Christmas. Because at *Easter* we remember that the same Jesus - God made man - who came to us at Christmas, died on the Cross and rose again from the dead, so that our sins may be forgiven and so that we may have eternal life. He was "born that *man* no more may die." When we watch an episode of *Eastenders* or *Coronation Street* which ends in some kind of a 'cliffhanger', we're naturally excited about wanting to see the *next* episode; soap operas work on the basis that their storylines are constantly 'to be continued...' In the same way, Christmas is a story 'to be continued' - to be continued and *completed* at Easter. Christmas makes no sense without Easter.

So, at the heart of the Christmas message is the truth that God has come to us in Jesus Christ. It's a message which requires a response from each one of us. Because God invites us to accept Jesus into our lives as our personal Lord and Saviour, so that we might be forgiven for all our wrongdoing, and that we may have eternal life in him. The Virgin Mary, when it had been announced to her that she had been chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus, she responded, "let it be with me according to your word" - she said 'yes' to the Lord. So, are we willing to say 'yes' to the Lord - to allow Christ to "cast out our sin, and enter in, [to] be born in us today."

And when we accept God's gift of Jesus Christ into our hearts and lives, we can know *real* joy. After the *shepherds* had visited the Christ child lying in the manger in Bethlehem, the Bible tells us that they went away "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen" - they were full of joy. When the star which the *wise men* were following had stopped over the place where the child lay, it says "*they* were overwhelmed with joy". The shepherds and the wise men were full of joy when they found the Lord. Theirs was *not* a joy which came from *earthly* pleasures, but rather an indescribable joy which came from *God*. Yes, all the nice

presents we receive this Christmas and all the food we'll enjoy, perhaps give us a fleeting sense of happiness – a kind of joy which is here today and gone tomorrow. But when we come to know the Lord Jesus in our lives, we can know a deep and lasting joy which comes from God alone - a joy which doesn't ignore all the difficulties we face in life, but which rather sustains us through them, as we journey on each day.

In our final Bible reading this afternoon, which we'll be hearing in a moment, we come to the very heart of what Christmas is really all about: that God, the maker and sustainer of the universe, has come among us in the person of Jesus Christ – the 'Word-made-Flesh', as the author of John's Gospel puts it. It reminds us that although no-one has ever seen God, God's only Son, Jesus Christ, has made him known to us. In other words, when we see *Jesus*, we see *God*; when we know *Jesus*, we know *God*.

And a little later on in the same Gospel, we find *these* well-known words - "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Jesus offers each one of *us* this gift of life - life in all its fullness - "Light and *life* to all he brings."

So, do *you* wish it could be Christmas every day – Christmas all year round? Well, it can be – *not* in a frivolous, commercial sense, of course, but in a way that is truly life-transforming. Because God offers us the greatest gift of all – a gift which is far superior to anything we can pick at an all-year-round Christmas shop, on Black Friday or in the January sales – it's the gift of new life in Jesus Christ. When we accept this most precious of gifts, then we will truly discover that 'Jesus is for *life*, not just for Christmas'.