

Enjoy Christmas

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At Christmas, Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus who is the saviour of our world. During Advent, which is a time of preparation for Christmas, we listen to the voice of the prophet Isaiah promising true liberation, hope, peace and joy. Five hundred years before the birth of Christ Isaiah tells us: “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone. You have made their gladness greater, you have made their joy increase; they rejoice in your presence as men rejoice at harvest time, as men are happy when they are dividing the spoils. For the yoke that was weighing on him, the bar across his shoulders, the rod of his oppressor, these you break on the day of Midian.... for there is a child born for us, a son is giving to us and dominion is laid on his shoulders; and this is the name they give him: Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty-God Eternal-Father, Prince-of-Peace. (Is. 9: 1-5).

If we are to really understand the meaning of this and similar texts which we read during Advent, then we must stand back and extricate ourselves from the tsunami of materialism which, unfortunately, now characterises the celebration of Christmas right across the globe. This mega-shopping experience was once confined to rich countries such as the U.S., Europe, Australia and New Zealand. But, now it is a global phenomenon. In November 2014 I spent time in China, Hong Kong and the Philippines. In each of these three places shopping malls were festooned with Christmas bunting and advertisements were luring people to shop and accumulate goods as if the world was going to end within a few weeks.

There is an extraordinary irony in the fact that our contemporary celebration of the birth of Christ who “was born in a manger because there was no room for him at the inn,” is marked by such gross materialism and waste. (Lk. 2: 8).

I believe that we need to tune out of Twitter, Facebook our Ipads or Ipods if we are to really capture and understand what the birth and life of Jesus means for our world today and for ourselves as Christians. We must take time out, even a few minutes each day to listen to God in prayer. The infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke help us to appreciate, in a small way, what we celebrate at

Christmas, namely that our God became human and therefore part of our extraordinary beautiful and complex universe. He did so, not in guise of the high-and-mighty, but in the poverty of the stable in Bethlehem, where within a short period his life would be in danger from the tyrant Herod. His life of poverty, as a wandering preacher who always championed the cause of those living on the margins of society means that, if we are to really follow Jesus in our own lives, we must also champion those who live on the margins in our global society today.

This is exactly what Pope Francis did when he spoke at the European Parliament about the plight of migrants and refugees. He called for a united response to migration and said that “we cannot allow the Mediterranean Sea to be a vast cemetery. People fleeing from poverty, from violence, coming across the Mediterranean Sea to land in Italy or some other country in Europe, being pushed away, dying at sea.”

This is the challenging message of Christ which we must open our hearts to at Christmas. Of course, is a special time for simple gifts, joy and family togetherness. But the shopping frenzy, the excesses and waste which often accompany it have no place in a truly Christian celebration of Christmas.