

Fail To Prepare...? (December 2018)

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By Rev Paul Graham

There's a picture doing the rounds again on Facebook of Noddy Holder, lead singer of seventies glam-rockers Slade with the caption "It's not Christmas until I say so", referencing his famous (infamous?) shouted line in their perennial Christmas favourite. Another picture I've seen reminds us that "there are 12 days of Christmas and none of them are in November".

These form salutary reminders that we can get a bit ahead of ourselves with Christmas. Let's face it, the shops are weeks, if not months, ahead of us. Cards, wrapping paper and the first snowman-decorated chocolates were in evidence whilst we were still waiting for the new school year to begin. Christmas specials for TV were recorded in the summer, with fake snow adorning the sweating faces of the cast and crew.

Now, of course, we can't get too uptight about this; after all, filming schedules, actor availability and the stress-levels of programme-makers all contribute to those unseasonal August recordings. Gone are the days of recording and broadcast being so close that you could almost hear the director's shouted "cut" as the programme begins. Unless specifically stated as "live", you can safely expect many weeks to have elapsed since the cameras finished rolling. Shops also have to get ahead to stay ahead. They see the chance to roll out the Christmas stock early to gain an advantage over their competitors and grasp it with both hands. Their argument that it's never too early to buy a Christmas card may be true, but I do somewhat baulk at the sight of mince pies with their limited shelf life being available in September. However, I'm also not keen on the year-round availability of hot cross buns, so it may say more about me than the retailer...

But we also can get in on the same game. We prepare Christmas programmes in church early; the thought of this year's "Christmas in a Box" floated around the Manse back in January and there are always many levels of planning required for the various Christmas services, sales and so on. Ideas have to be allowed time to develop and, if necessary die and be reborn long before the first Christmas carol is sung.

We are also wise to get ahead in our planning and even in our action. It makes financial sense to buy next year's Christmas cards in the January sales as shops make room for their spring and summer stock. It doesn't hurt to work out who is going to be where over the festive season, so everyone gets their "turn".

Of course, life has a habit of getting in the way and we have probably all experienced the feeling of having to make alterations, change course and sometimes even totally abandon those carefully made plans. Some people never make plans, or they rely on that last minute thrill of not quite knowing what tomorrow might bring, but I'm not one of those people. I think I'll always want to have some idea of what might (or indeed might not) happen, even if these plans need to be held loosely at times.

And it's not just us that are susceptible to change. People's names being crossed off Christmas card lists is one of the more sad moments of the year; the realisation that through changing circumstances, by death, divorce or disinterest we now have one extra Christmas card left in the box and one less to receive and display. But of course names also get added; a reminder for those who still send cards of friends gained through the year.

So, a bit of planning and preparation is probably a good thing. The church calendar is set up for that as well, though the focus doesn't really click into gear this year until the first weekend in December as we commence Advent. But Advent is not just about the calendar and whether you'll be finding a chocolate, a

whiskey miniature, a toolkit or a Lego character behind each daily door (all available, and more, from your local retailers).

Advent is the time to prepare for the birth of Christ. This year's Advent sermons are focussing on Zechariah and Elizabeth, on Mary and John (sorry, Joseph doesn't get much of a look in this year), as met in the first chapter of Luke. However, unlike the many generations before them, we don't have to wait all our lives for Jesus to be born, but we can at least give four weeks within the busy year to think about what Jesus' long-awaited arrival on Earth might mean. As we encounter them through our twenty-first century eyes, fully aware of the regularity of Christmas, the annual rhythm of those same old Christmas songs and carols and even the familiarity of the story, I hope we find something new and fresh. Something unexpected, just like the too-old parents and the unblemished teenager.

Maybe we'll find something fresh and new in a shoebox scene at "Christmas in a Box"; maybe we'll find it as we miss old friends and family or enjoy the company of new ones. Maybe we'll find it in the chaos or in the stillness. Maybe we'll find it amidst the sprouts and puddings and excessive eating, or amidst the wish for these things. Maybe we'll find it in the stable, wrapped in cloths, surrounded by love and confusion, hope and fear.

As we approach the end of 2018 and anticipate the New Year to come, may we once again be prepared to be surprised by Jesus, who was born only once but is borne within all who will receive him.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Saviour has just been born in David's town, a Saviour who is Messiah and Master."

Luke 2:10-11a (The Message)