

So Here It Is... (December 2019)

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by Rev Paul Graham

“...Merry Christmas, everybody’s having fun” so goes the chorus for the perennially popular Slade Christmas hit, played and sung every year since its original release in 1973. Ever-present at Christmas parties across the land, who isn’t swept up in the joy of the song or the anticipation of Noddy Holder’s unmistakably Brummie clarion call of “It’s Christmas!”?

The problem is, of course, not everybody has fun at Christmas. And it’s up to us Christians to remind people that not everything is tinsel and baubles in this bleak mid-winter. For every over-indulgent Christmas table creaking under the weight of turkey, sprouts, chocolates and crackers, there are equivalent numbers who anticipate the festive season with dread and fear. Even the heart-warming glow intended by high street advertisers to entice us to ever greater shows of love and devotion (all neatly wrapped with receipts in case we get it wrong) just serve to highlight the distance between those who have and those who have not.

And the church, forever charged with being the voice of the voiceless, the raiser of the down-trodden and the includer of the marginalised, has a task to do to remind those bathed in the warmth and light of their Christmas decorations of the misery and darkness in the shadows.

Or has it?

There’s the old song “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart”; sometimes I wonder how deeply buried in that life-sustaining organ the joy must be as it rarely seems to see the light of day. Saying it four times doesn’t make any difference if it’s not reflected in speech, behaviour, or the messages that are broadcast. And, let’s face it, Christmas is one of those occasions when people might just sit up and listen to what the church has to say. And do.

“I bring good news of great joy that will be for all the people”, says the angel to the shepherds. And yet churches seem to bring exactly the opposite message at Christmas. Good news gets relegated to the post-script once we’ve fully explained what the bad news is. Great joy is actively discouraged for any number of reasons, not least because we don’t want to feel guilty about enjoying ourselves too much when there are so many problems in the world...

Churches at this time of year are replete with posters and appeals for all the worthy causes that vie for our attention as vociferously as supermarkets and shops. Those of us who plan services can be guilty of targeting certain services for certain causes: children’s charities for crib services, donkey sanctuaries for live nativities, etc. And, whereas on the one hand there is nothing wrong in doing this as it raises vital funds to keep these essential services open, it also can raise other problems.

We can foster deeper disconnections with those we should be embracing as fellow members of the human race by highlighting our differences. How sad to see the dirty faced, shivering urchin staring dewy-eyed from the glossy brochure, we say from the comfort and distance of our tastefully decorated, candle-lit church. “Even if our own homes aren’t as good/clean/big/well-run (delete as applicable) as they could be, at least we don’t have it as bad as...” (fill in your own blanks here). We run the risk of creating a bigger divide than we find in the presence of the outcast shepherds being welcomed into the divine birthplace as fellow joy-sharers. Do you really think that one of the things Mary treasured up in her heart was the state of their clothes?

We can delude ourselves that paying money will make the problem go away, or at least ensure that it remains somebody else's responsibility to fix it. Instead of doing something active that has the potential to make our lives messier, disordered and stressed, we dig into our already strained wallets and purses as the plate comes round. For those who can offer so much more, is that really enough? How different we are to those royal visitors to the infant Jesus, who also put their mouths where their money was. What do we learn from those who were willing to interrupt their schedules to travel many miles in order to get their robes grubby as they humbly knelt in joyful adoration?

It seems that there is little point highlighting other people's misery unless we're willing to do something about it. Otherwise, it risks becoming a gawping, gaping exhibition of "poor them" as we tuck into our 15th mince pie of the season. Maybe we ought to be joyfully sharing our mince pies instead...

Good news becomes easier to share when we realise that we need it just as much as anyone else. We're not afforded privileged status because of anything we've done, said or given. Good news is for all the people, including me and you and everyone else. We can excavate that deep-buried joy by finding ways to shorten the distance between "us" and "them". We might even find that there is only "us". Then, though we might not be having fun (sorry, Noddy), at least we're all part of "everybody".

The Parable that Jesus never intended...

For this edition, I was struggling to get everything that I wanted to say into one article. So, as a "Christmas Special", here's a second instalment:

Alongside all that has been written already about good news and Slade, I've taken the opportunity to reread Matthew 25, specifically Jesus' teaching about the sheep and the goats. Here we see that Jesus challenges our understanding of "us" and "them" by putting himself amongst the "others" that are marginalised, mistreated and downtrodden. There is also the challenge to place ourselves in the story. In order to do this, I've taken a leaf out the books of many Christian writers before me, by writing an addendum to the parable. Please don't take this as heretical, but rather my attempt to promote thought...

As we find ourselves in an increasingly less binary world, where there seems to be more than two options for everything, I think it's time we added a third animal to Jesus' teaching, a herd that possibly better reflects our reality as servants of Jesus. Ladies and gentlemen, my Christmas present to you for this year is to introduce you to the alpacas, the companions to the sheep and the goats:

Matthew 25:33(ish): *...He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left and the alpacas in the middle*

25:47 *"Having dealt with the goats and the sheep, then he will say to the alpacas, "Now, what do I do with you lot?"*

"For I was hungry, and you donated to the Foodbank, but you didn't invite me to your table because you were worried that I might steal your stuff.

"I was thirsty and you donated to WaterAid, which was possibly all you could do because you're lucky to live in a country where turning on a tap is all you need to do.

"I was a stranger and though you made sure that the homeless shelter was open, once there I was approached by people who forced me to work for them for no money.

"I needed clothes so you gave me your cast-offs and hoped I wouldn't notice the holes and frayed edges.

"I was sick and in prison, so you all left it up to the health and police authorities to look after me, because you're too busy to get involved.

"Why on earth didn't you do more when you had the chance?"

25:48 So he sent the alpacas off to try again next year...