

FOCUS ON FAITH

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PARTY INVITATION

For most of us Christmas is a time of celebration. I say 'most' because there are some people that don't recognise Christmas as a festival either because of their religious beliefs or because they don't have any beliefs. For others this time of year holds painful memories, for instance the death of a family member or another tragedy that prevents them from fully appreciating the season.

But why do we celebrate Christmas?

For many of us it's tradition. When we think of the time of year we often have the archetypal Christmas card scene in our minds with a winter snow panorama, smiling children playing in front of a log fire or skating across a frozen lake or maybe they're dressed up in hats and scarves singing carols by lantern light.

Idyllic? Maybe. Realistic? Probably not!

Parties aren't much fun if the guest of honour doesn't turn up – especially if they aren't even invited

For some families Christmas isn't always the season of peace and joy or goodwill it's supposed to be either but rather a time to be endured instead of enjoyed. That may be related to the financial cost, especially this year with the effects of the credit crunch biting, or because the future is not looking as certain as it did previously. Or possibly with advancing years we've become either blasé or cynical that Christmas is just another excuse for us to be convinced by the advertising campaigns to spend our money on the latest 'must have' or improved model that will again be superseded in a few months time.

Of course Christmas for some has become a time of excess, over-indulgence and potential danger. The office party can be fraught with temptations of different kinds and we all know that sales of headache and heartburn tablets rocket at this time of year.

Christmas should be a time to celebrate – after all the angel who announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds said that he'd come to announce good news of great joy for everyone. There is a popular misconception about Christians that they are 'doom and gloom merchants'. I understand where that comes from and I have to admit that there are some folks I know who do give a very good impersonation of grumpy old men and women but that shouldn't be the case.

So even though the first Christmas scene wasn't like the one I've depicted above I still believe there was a great deal of celebration and festivity going on. It's almost certain there wasn't any snow – it probably wasn't even December anyway – although I suppose it

could have been cold and frosty overnight for those shepherds out on the hillsides. However I do believe God is into parties and celebrations in a big way and here's why.

That first Christmas there were family reunions taking place. If you remember the story everyone had had to return to their family homes in order for a census to be taken. So people would have been meeting up with relatives they hadn't seen for some time and no doubt celebrating old acquaintances regaling each other with (probably embarrassing) stories from the past.

There was the delight of a new birth – which usually evokes a party atmosphere

And there was a lot of singing – always the sign of a good old knees-up – as the angels gave the news in song to the shepherds.

There are a couple of other reasons why I believe God loves parties. The first miracle Jesus performed when He grew up was at a wedding reception when He turned water into wine. Secondly the Bible also tells us that the angels throw a party and rejoice every time someone becomes a Christian.

Now parties aren't much fun if the guest of honour doesn't turn up especially if they aren't even invited.

The real focus of Christmas is Jesus Christ and if we leave Him out there's not much of substance to celebrate about – especially when we consider the event is actually named after him. As we approach Christmas this year I would ask you to consider whether or not you've invited Him to the party. He's not going to gate-crash your celebration – He'd prefer a personal invitation.

The Bible tells us that ultimately God is going to throw the biggest, most spectacular party of all time. On that occasion He'll be the one issuing the invitations. The infant in the manger whose birthday we celebrate at Christmas will be the guest of honour – no longer a baby but the Lord of lords and King of kings.

The most famous verse in the Bible is probably John 3: 16 – ***"God loved the world so much that He sent His one and only Son so that everyone who believes in Him will have eternal life"***.

That's the invitation and it's available to each one of us – R.S.V.P.?

Christian churches in the area will be holding various services over the Christmas period. If you'd like to find out when and where please log on to www.lifting-jesus-higher.org.uk which provides information on local Churches together with contact details, plus information on activities and other Christian resources.