

FOCUS ON FAITH

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MAKING CHRISTMAS COUNT

It's amazing to me how quickly 2009 has gone – and yet here we are, well into the preparations for Christmas and beginning to think about 2010. In my previous business career this was always a stressful and hectic time of the year – frantically trying to make sure that targets, income and company goals were achieved and yet having one eye on what was necessary to start the next year off with a bang.

As a church leader these days the two great Festivals we celebrate, Easter and Christmas, are also frenetic. Carol Services come thick and fast in December; cards have to be written (and the ones received, read) and all the preparations for culminating day have to be made. And of course it might be a Bank Holiday for the majority of the population but I have to work on Christmas Day – is that sympathetic sobbing I hear in the background?

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Seriously though, Christmas in this country is a wonderful occasion for most of us as we take a little time out from our busy schedules and hopefully spend some of it with family and friends. Yet for many others it is fraught with sadness and difficulties such as:

- Remembering those of our loved ones that can't be with us especially those who have passed away;
- The loneliness of those who have no-one with whom to share the celebrations and the feelings of guilt over estranged relationships where family rifts have broken bonds that should link us together;
- Worries about overstretching ourselves financially as the pressures of the credit crunch hit home or coping with the expectations of children and others in terms of the presents we're prepared to buy as well as the "keeping up with the Joneses" syndrome;
- Even being at home spending time with the family can be difficult for some – regretfully statistics show the incidence of marital breakdowns increases immediately after an extended holiday period.

And of course we know that Christmas in our day and age is a far cry from the original event that we're supposed to be celebrating. There were no reindeer and Santa and his little elf helpers hadn't been dreamt up; no picturesque postcard scenes of decorated trees and snow on the ground; turkey and all the trimmings and mince pies were no-where to be seen. There weren't any carols to sing and for goodness sake it wasn't even 25th December! For those of you who really believe all this – I'm sorry if I have burst your bubble!

No, the first Christmas celebrated the birth of an amazing, miraculous baby who would eventually become the person

we Christians believe to be the Saviour of the World. The birth of Jesus Christ may seem far-fetched, even a ludicrous fantasy to some, but more that 50% of the world's population have found it to be a reality.

More than 650 years before the event, a man called Isaiah made a prophetic announcement about this birth. He said that a child would be born who would have 4 titles describing his life's mission and purpose. Over the weeks leading up to Christmas – the period we Christians call "Advent" – they are the focus for the Prayers for the Week the Journal carries.

The child that would be born would be a "**Wonderful Counsellor**", a "**Mighty God**", an "**Everlasting Father**" and the "**Prince of Peace**". Space in this edition of the Journal doesn't permit us to look at all these names but I'd just like us to spend a few moments on the last of these four designations.

Peace is such an elusive component in our lives isn't it? I'm not just thinking about peace in the absence of war and conflict – peace between nations and peoples. The area I'm thinking about is that of peace and quiet – which may be very difficult to find if you have excitable children at Christmas.

Most of us will be so busy with work and preparations right up to the last moment before Christmas that we'll hardly draw breath before it is upon us – and then it will soon be over for another year and our frantic schedules will take over again.

But it needn't be that way. Advent is supposed to be a time to meditate, reflect and prepare ourselves rather than wear ourselves out and get stressed. And Advent also points us forward – to the promised return of Jesus' second coming. This time He won't be coming as a baby but as the all-conquering King of kings.

You see the reason one of Jesus' names is "**Prince of Peace**" is that He enables us to have a relationship with God. The Bible tells us that we were God's enemies but Jesus came to bring peace between God and human beings.

Let's make Christmas count this year. It will be great sharing and celebrating yes, but we need take a few moments to take stock, think about the real priorities of life, the relationships that matter and especially our relationship with God.

After He gave us the greatest present of all – His Son – that we might not just have a peaceful Christmas but a life of peace.

To find out more about the Christian faith and resources available plus information on local Churches together with contact details and details of Christmas services, please log on to www.lifting-jesus-higher.org.uk.