
What's the point of Christmas?

Let me answer this question by first referring to a monk from eastern Europe called Dionysius Exiguus – ‘Little Denis’ – who 500 years after the birth of Christ was tasked with standardising the many conflicting church calendars. Denis decided that the basis for all calendars ought to be Jesus’ birth and so began dates with *Anno Domini* (the Year of the Lord). The idea caught on with the result that it’s what much of the world uses today, even if it is considered more politically correct to replace AD and BC with CE for ‘Common Era’ and BCE for ‘Before Common Era’. Whether Denis got the date of the birth of Jesus right or was out by a few years is unimportant; the fact is he anchored all history around the birth of the baby in Bethlehem.

So, what is the point of Christmas? Let me offer you *three* points!

First, Christmas offers us a *fixed point to anchor us*. ‘Little Denis’ chose the first Christmas as the great, immovable point of history. Here, in something so significant that it was the reference point for all history, as Jesus, God had entered his own creation. Now, fixed reference points are essential. In constructing a building, there will always be one precisely defined spot from which all other measurements are taken. In creating a map there will be one accurately fixed base point from which surveys extend. This principle of needing a reference or fixed point applies to time, space, temperature, medicine and many other things. Without fixed points, everything becomes chaos. The need of a fixed point applies in our lives: without one, we can’t know what’s right or wrong. Indeed, the absence of any such reference point

today is seen how, in our bewildering world, vices and virtues, heroes and villains shift places according to who is currently shouting loudest. The coming of Christ into the world offers a fixed point around which we and our culture can base all that we are and all that we do. The moral plumb line against which every life stands is pinned to the birth of Christ. To discover the true significance of the real Christmas is to be like a lost night-time wanderer spotting the pole star.

Question: What's the point of Christmas?

Answer: You can securely build a life upon it. Have you?

Second, Christmas offers a *viewpoint to cheer us*. I don't know if surveys of optimism exist, but I suspect the values measured this Christmas would be close to an all-time low. This year, wars, environmental crises, political struggles and economic problems seem not merely to have continued but to have escalated and worsened. Yet in the authentic, biblical Christmas, we see amid the deepest darkness, a bright light of hope. The gospel announces that in this baby, God has become involved in the world. Imagine you live in some little village where an historic mansion has been empty and abandoned for years and seems destined to tumble into ruins. Then one day, the tattered *For Sale* notice vanishes, a new occupant moves in, the furniture vans arrive followed by builders, electricians, carpenters and decorators. It's a tremendous encouragement. You are seeing a costly, deliberate commitment to repairing and restoring the mansion. So it is that at the first Christmas, God made an even more costly commitment to his damaged world and to all who will accept him. Powers and principalities can wage their wars and unleash their horrors, and we should do our best to stop them, but behind and beyond them, God remains Sovereign and reigns and rules. At Bethlehem he has

demonstrated his commitment to rescue, redeem and repair our humanity and world. However much the world scene may seem shrouded in the darkest night, from the stable at Bethlehem you can glimpse that dawn is beginning to break.

Question: What's the point of Christmas?

Answer: It offers us a cheering viewpoint. Is it yours?

Third, Christmas offers a *turning point to challenge us*. Little Denis had a point – the first Christmas is the great hinge on which all of 'real' history turns. There, God came into this world to act for good. Indeed, with Jesus' life, death, resurrection and his gift of the Spirit, the world did slowly start to change for the better. Yet the idea that Christmas is a turning point most strongly applies to us as individuals. Christianity announces that at Christmas, God *himself* arrived in person to be one of us. It is a bold, costly action that demands a bold and costly response from us. History turned on the coming of Christ. Have our own lives also turned on the same point? Not simply around the comfortable Christmas image of the baby in the wooden cradle but also the uncomfortable Easter image of God on the wooden cross. The turning point of Christmas is the start of the great transaction: God taking on all that we are so that we could become like who he is.

What's the point of Christmas? It gives us a fixed point, a viewpoint and a turning point for history and for us. It's the time for celebration, but also for action. Has your life turned around because of Christmas? If not, why not? And why not now?

Grace and peace,

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