

Being Ready for Christmas

Many of us arrive at Christmas tired, running, distracted, and already fatigued with the lights, songs, and celebrations of Christmas. Advent is meant to be a time of preparation for Christmas; but for many of us it is not exactly a time for the kind of preparation that enables Christ be born more deeply in our lives. Instead our preparation for Christmas is mostly a time of making ready to celebrate with our families, friends, and colleagues. The days leading up to Christmas are rarely serene. Instead we find ourselves harried and hurried putting up decorations, shopping for gifts, sending out cards, preparing food, and attending Christmas socials. Moreover, when Christmas arrives, we are already tired of Christmas carols, having heard them already, non-stop, for weeks in our shopping malls, restaurants, public squares, and on our radio stations.



And so Christmas, itself, generally finds us more in a pressured and tired space than in a leisured and rested one. Indeed sometimes the Christmas season is more an endurance test than a time of genuine enjoyment. Moreover and more seriously, if we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that in our preparations for Christmas, we, in fact, make very little space for the spiritual, for Christ to be born more deeply in our lives. Our time of preparation is generally more of a time to prepare our houses than a time to prepare our souls, more of a time of shopping than of prayer, and more of a time of already feasting than a time of fasting as a preparation for a feast. Today advent is perhaps more about already celebrating Christmas than it is about preparing for it.

And the end result is that, like the biblical innkeepers who had no room for Mary and Joseph at the first Christmas, we generally arrive at Christmas with “no room at the inn”, no space in our lives for a spiritual rebirth. Our hearts are good, we want Christmas to renew us spiritually, but our lives are too pressured, too full of activity and tiredness, for us to have any real energy to make Christmas a special time of spiritual renewal for ourselves. The spirit of Christmas is still in us, real, but lying like a

neglected baby in the straw waiting to be picked up. And we do intend to pick up the baby, but simply never get around to it.

So how bad are we?

Now, while this should challenge us to take a look at ourselves, it is not as bad as many religious critics make it out to be. Arriving at Christmas with a life too busy and too distracted to make more room for Christ doesn't make us bad persons. It doesn't mean that we are mindless pagans. And it doesn't mean that Christ has died in our lives. We are not bad, faithless, and pagan because we habitually arrive at Christmas too distracted, too busy, too pressured, and too tired to make much of a conscious effort to make this feast a time of real spiritual renewal in our lives. Our spiritual lethargy simply defines us as more human than angelic, more earthy than platonic, and as more sensual than spiritual. I suspect that God fully understands this condition.

Indeed, everyone struggles with this in some fashion. No one is perfect; no one gives a full place in his or her life to Christ, even at Christmas time. That should bring us some consolation. But it should also leave us with a pressing challenge: There is too little room for Christ in our busy, distracted lives! We must work at clearing some space for Christ, at making Christmas a time of spiritual refreshment and renewal in our lives.

How do we do that?

In the days leading up to Christmas, many of us struggle to do all the things we need to do to be ready for all that needs to happen in our houses, churches, and places of work. We need to shop for gifts, send out cards, put up lights and decorations, plan menus, buy food, attend a goodly number of Christmas socials at work, at church, at friends' houses. This, added on to the normal pressures within our lives, not infrequently leaves us with the feeling: I'm not going to make it! I won't be ready! I won't be ready for Christmas! That's a common feeling.

But being ready for Christmas, getting everything we need to do done on time, making it, does not depend upon getting everything neatly checked off on our to-do list: gifts, done; cards, done; decorations, done; food, ready; the requisite number of social obligations, completed. Even if that list is only half done, if you find yourself in church at Christmas, if you find yourself at table with your family on Christmas day, and if you find yourself greeting your neighbors and colleagues with a little

more warmth, then it doesn't matter if you are distracted, tired, over-fed, and not thinking explicitly about Jesus, you've made it.

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