CHRISTMAS UNWRAPPED

Hi everyone! Welcome to our “Christmas Unwrapped” virtual service. I am going to try to think about Christmas from a slightly different perspective.

So why do we celebrate Christmas? First, why do non-Christians celebrate it?......We know the answer to that. From people who are, as it turns out, justifiably frightened that, because of Covid 19, Christmas might not happen as normal. Christmas is a time to be with those we love and to eat lots of wonderful food and give each other lots of lovely presents.

So, what about Christians? Why do we celebrate Christmas?.......All of the above. Plus, Christmas is when we celebrate the birth of Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem. And why do we do that? …….We all know, or most of us do, that Jesus died to save us from the consequence of all that we do wrong, our sins.

I want to go a bit deeper. What I am really asking is what does Jesus do for those who do not believe in him? He did die for us all. Is there any reason for non-believers to celebrate his birth at Christmas......

Who was Jesus? We do know that he definitely existed because a contemporary Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote about him and said the following.

*About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who performed surprising deeds and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Christ.*

Let’s get this straight. The official Christian view is that Jesus on earth was fully man and fully God. This is based on lots of stuff in the Bible which is actually pretty convincing.

However, what everyone, Christians and non- Christians alike, might hopefully agree about, if they read the Sermon on the Mount, for example, (the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5 to 7), is that, whether we see Jesus as God or not, what he taught forms the basis of a loving, unselfish and good life.

Most of us who call ourselves Christians try to live in this way.

Then again, many people who do not call themselves Christians, live the sort of life that Jesus taught and modelled, both members of other faiths and atheists, and perhaps without realising they are following him. They make the world a much better place.

So what effect does Jesus have on the human race, believers and non-believers alike, that we should all remember him? Over the last two thousand years, there has been an enormous amount of good done in, for example, the areas of health, (think of all the missionary hospitals and hospices) and education, (many schools were founded by Christians, and many others have a specifically Christian ethos). There are all the stunning buildings, not least cathedrals, that were built in the name of Jesus. And there are all the wonderful pieces of music and works of art that have been written in the name of Jesus.

In this country and others, the legal system is based on Christian values. The model of family life, at least until very recently, has been based on Christian teachings. Many charities are officially Christian based and many unofficially. I have only scratched the surface. And think of all the instances of forgiveness that have occurred in the name of Jesus, for example when Gordon Wilson forgave the IRA for killing his daughter.

So Jesus is responsible for a huge amount of good in our world, even if people choose not to acknowledge that.

What does it actually mean to follow Jesus, in terms of behaviour, not belief? Here are a few examples from the Sermon on the Mount.

We are to be light in the world, so a positive influence. We should not commit murder, and try not even to be angry with each other. We should not commit adultery and try not to think about people in that sort of way. And forgive each other, and not judge each other, etc. This is obviously a good way to live. Bear in mind, that when Jesus first preached a lot of it was new and challenging. It is a bit different now. Perhaps we should try to imagine that we are hearing it from Jesus for the first time.

The two main things he asked of us were that we should love God deeply and love each other. The main way loving God plays out, the way it shows, the fruit if you like, is in the loving of each other. What Jesus asked of us all, is that we care for others at least as much as we care for ourselves.

One recent example that shows that this is happening in our community is the carol singing round the Christmas tree on the Green at Meonstoke, which raised £10,000 for the Roberts Centre.

There is plenty of reason for Christians and non-Christians alike to celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas, quite apart from anything spiritual or theological.

He has had a massive effect on the world. You could argue that no other person has had such an impact on humanity.

So let us pray together.

Dear Lord,

I pray that members of all religions and none might remember this Christmas at least some of the things that your Son Jesus has done for us and might make some space for him in their Christmas celebrations.

Amen

Now let’s say the Lord’s Prayer together.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever, Amen.

And now the Grace.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, now and evermore, Amen.