

Reading

1 Corinthians 4, 1-5

So look at Apollos and me as mere servants of Christ who have been put in charge of explaining God's mysteries. Now, a person who is put in charge as a manager must be faithful. As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don't even trust my own judgment on this point. My conscience is clear, but that doesn't prove I'm right. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide.

So don't make judgments about anyone ahead of time—before the Lord returns. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due.

Sermon

Christmas is fast approaching. Excitement is in the air. As the sun rises every morning, so Christmas returns every December. It is one of the most important reference points in our calendar, and not just for Christians. Christmas has become far more than just a Christian festival and it is celebrated worldwide. For some it is a festival with a deep religious meaning, for others the highlight of the commercial year, for some a cosy family party, for others again the one day of the year when the streets are finally empty and quiet.

Opinion polls suggest that the most important Christmas activities are: family gatherings, enjoying the calm and peace, and going to church. Christmas is an expression of people's utmost longing for warmth, light and the feeling of security which the German word 'Geborgenheit' describes so accurately. I would go even further. Christmas is about our utmost wish to return to our very roots, to return to our mother's womb, this place of warmth and security. Christmas is our wish to return to the mysterious place where we came from and that we know does never fully exist here on earth. We might catch glimpses of it, we might feel moments or periods of warmth, light and security, but these are rare and often absent. We all

experience loneliness, insecurity and loss in our lives that is deeply unsettling for our souls. At Christmas, we seek to recreate the feeling of belonging. At every street corner the promise of Christmas awaits us. For some this hope will become reality in their family home. Others will feel the absence of warmth and security even more, the raw and unforgiving absence of a safe place and of an environment where we feel loved.

So if Christmas is a festival for everyone, regardless of one's religion or spirituality, what is Christian about Christmas?

Interestingly, this is a question that was debated throughout church history. The celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ is not a biblical tradition, nor have the early Christians celebrated Jesus' birthday. The focus of the early Christian communities was on the Cross and resurrection of the Son of God and the message of salvation of the human race. Only in the 4th Century, nearly 400 years after Jesus' death and resurrection did Pope Julius I. determine the 25th of December as the birthday of Jesus Christ. It was the festival of the Roman Sun God, and Christmas should replace the celebration of the old gods. The Christmas traditions as we know them today, the tree, the nativity scene, the singing of carols or the advent wreath, were introduced one by one at different times in history. For instance, the decorated Christmas tree is a tradition that only dates back to the 19th Century. The first reported nativity scene was built in Prague in 1562, and its main purpose was to visualise the birth of Christ for people who were unable to read the Christmas story in the Bible. Most people were illiterate and had no access to the Bible.

Even the church reformers in the 16th Century were ambiguous about Christmas. One of the main concerns of the reformation was to refocus Christian faith on the Holy Scripture. The Bible should be in the centre of Christian faith, and not the historically grown dogmas of the church hierarchy in Rome. So was the opinion of the reformers. And the celebration of Christmas was nowhere to be found in the Bible. According to the gospels, only a few shepherds and a small group of wise men understood that the Messiah was born. And no Christmas celebrations are reported from the early Christians community. Whereas Luther and Zwingli adopted the celebration of Christmas and its traditions, Calvin in Geneva opposed many aspects

of the Christmas festival. There should be no singing and no celebrating, only reading from the Bible was allowed. In Scotland, John Knox prohibited the celebration of Christmas all together, and so for parts of the 16th Century, Presbyterians in Scotland did not celebrate Christmas at all. Christmas was not rooted in the Bible and therefore nor considered Christian.

I went on a walk the other day, pondering on the Christian meaning of Christmas. One thought kept returning to my mind: that Christmas was all about generosity. I am not talking about the Christmas presents, although those of course are a generous gesture too. In the Bible, generosity is described as the act of giving up our personal possessions to provide for the poor. Jesus shared his belongings with the poor and encouraged his disciples, encouraged us, to do the same. Yet generosity is not merely a material act.

God's generosity is so much bigger than just material. God gave his son. God was born to share the burdens and joys of human life with us. Christmas is the generous act of God to give himself to us and to become human, to embrace humanity and to be one of us.

Over the past year, I have got to know many people who have very little and who live in great poverty. I always thought that generosity means to walk to the next shop and buy something from them: a sandwich, a hot drink or a shirt. Yet what I have learnt is that real generosity is to refrain from presumptions what others need or want, and much rather to share life with them and to find out what is really needed. Very often we find that the biggest needs, even of the poorest, are not material. In a city like London, people will always find a way to feed themselves. What is much harder to find are immaterial things. People want to be respected. They want to be seen. They want to belong. We want to know that someone believes in us, whether we are rich or poor, young or old, strangers or natives. And none of this can be bought in a supermarket.

So often we think that we know what others need, or that we know who they are. We base our judgement on what we think is true. But how can we know the truth? Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth: *"It matters very little how I might be evaluated by*

you or by any human authority. I don't even trust my own judgment on this point. My conscience is clear, but that doesn't prove I'm right. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide. So don't make judgments about anyone ahead of time. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due."

I find that especially in our families and in our closely knit church communities we believe to know what the others need or who they are. The better we know one another, the more easily we develop presumptions. We think we know what our brothers and aunts, our friends or children need. We think we know who they are and what they need. But if we listen carefully, we often find out that our presumptions are wrong.

Let us this Advent and Christmas embrace the full meaning of God's generosity: that generosity is much more than just giving material things. Generosity means to embrace human life in its diversity and brokenness, to give people our time, to lend an open ear and a non-judgemental heart, to share the joys and burdens of life that are different for everyone, and to humbly take a step back from our own positions and opinions. The truth lies with God alone, and God will be the judge to examine what is right and what is wrong. Let us follow God, who did not presume to know what we need, but who became human like us to find out. Let us act like Paul, with a clear conscience knowing that we have no prove that we are right. Let's not judge, but let's leave the judgment to God:

God who gave his only son. God who became human, and who embraced humanity in an act of utmost generosity.

Amen