

Merry Christmas!

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney, at a service of lessons and carols on Christmas Eve 2012, by David Gill

It happens every year. We hear stories about how someone, somewhere, is trying to spoil Christmas, or at least diminish it in some way.

Maybe another shopping mall has banned carol singers. Or a government department has sent cards wishing people happy holidays instead of happy Christmas. Or there's yet another tale about Facebook telling people to delete pictures of the nativity from their profiles lest someone should take offense.

It is the silly season, of course. Real news is in short supply. We shouldn't be surprised when editors fill their empty spaces with stories that might sell a few more newspapers or attract a few more viewers. Unfortunately, though, such stories, even if true, can cause harm: feeding Christian paranoia, fostering hostility to people of other faiths, stirring the pot of community discord.

The prize this year must go to the *Sun-Herald*, which yesterday led its front page with a headline screaming "Fatwa against Christmas: The Lakemba Mosque has warned followers it is a 'sin' to wish people a merry Christmas".

Apparently an imam had told his congregation to beware of seeming to give any support to Christian religious festivals. Readers who got past the shock-horror headline quickly discovered the imam had been repudiated by Muslim leaders across the land. The best response came from a spokesman for the peak Muslim body, the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, who with a nice touch of irony said simply "I would like to wish all your readers a merry Christmas and a happy new year".

Within hours the authorities of Lakemba Mosque had retracted, saying it was all a mistake. Full marks to our Muslim friends for their fast and efficient damage control.

Maybe Christmas is under pressure in Australia today, but it's not from people of other faiths. No religious group wants Christ taken out of Christmas. What we do

want, all of us, is a nation in which each religious community can celebrate its festivals with their integrity undiminished and their religious content intact, an Australia in which we respect each other's special days and share each other's rejoicing.

But, you know, if a few of our Christmas customs are under pressure, for whatever reasons, that may not be altogether a bad thing. Understandably, we react to any changes by feeling a hint of resentment that someone is trying to steal *our* Christmas, threaten *our* cherished memories, diminish *our* festival, harm things that *we* know and love.

But hold on, it's not *our* Christmas is it? Christians don't own Christmas. Any more than the church owns Christ. Or religious people own God. These great and mighty wonders transcend all our doctrines and doubts, all our religious labels and yes our antireligious ones too, all our individual quirks and convictions, all our personal strengths and weaknesses. Know it or not, like it not, the whole human family is caught up in the divine-human drama whose beginning we mark this holy night.

If our Christmas observances are under pressure today, the pressure might just be God's way of shaking us up a bit and saying ... this day is not only for you! The child born this night comes not just for card-carrying Christians. This child is born for all. Will live for all. Will die and rise for all. With no exceptions, no exclusions.

True, what you make of the claims of the Christian faith matters. Believing is important. But perhaps wondering is even more important. The wondering that hears the old stories, revels in the old songs and asks: can this really be true? The wondering that ponders the Jesus drama beginning this night and asks: is this really a glimpse into the heart of God? The wondering that, with no illusions about tragedy or evil, gazes upon the love that came down at Christmas and asks: is this, can this be, the way things really are?

Such wondering is an essential element of faith. It puts us in great company. Think Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, those astrologers following their star. Think all who have pondered these stories before us and sung these songs through centuries

past. Think saints and sinners, believers and sceptics, wise people and fools. Think Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox and believers who claim no label at all. Think people of other religions and of none, wanting to understand what the Jesus story might signify. If some of all that wondering produces results that don't match up neatly with the approved doctrines of the church, well, who are we to quibble?

We don't own Christmas. It would be truer to say that Christmas owns us. For what lies there, waiting, in that stable in Bethlehem, is the world's destiny, nothing less. The God in whom we are, all of us, called to find light, life, joy and our eternal home.

GK Chesterton spoke of it in his poem "The House of Christmas":

*To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home".*

All, including you my friend. All, including even me.

May your wondering be blessed, your celebration this day be joyful. And may you have – in the words of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils – a Merry Christmas!

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