

Cross Current

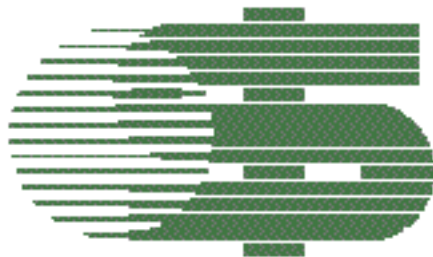


Real help for real life

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Don't Buy It!



It was the very definition of bedlam.

In 1247, St. Mary of Bethlehem Hospital was founded in England and, two hundred years later, was converted into an asylum for the insane. In those days, patients were chained and often abused so the institution soon became known

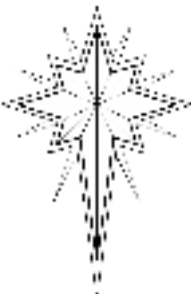
across the country for its noise and confusion. Over time, the original name Bethlehem was shortened to Bedlam, a word that gradually came to mean “a scene of uproar and confusion”.

In much the same way, the original meaning of Christmas has changed from hope, healing and holiness to madness — Midnight and otherwise. The focus is no longer on the Christmas Presence, but on the Christmas presents.

While advertising promises Joy To the Whirled, there's no realism in materialism. It's a fantasy to believe things can make you happy, or make people love you if they don't already. Despite what we're told, there is no rest or comfort in The Sweet Buy and Buy. The joy of consumerism is a sham and a shame — it's the hustle in the season's hustle and bustle.

So often, Christmas becomes one big blur. We get caught up in the trappings and traditions, spending money we don't have on people we don't like, either out of guilt or obligation. It leaves us tired, broke and disillusioned but we fall for it every year. God must look down with hurt and exasperation and think, *O Come On, All Ye Faithful!*

Part of the problem, of course, is that we pack too much expectation into just one day. But the truth is, if we don't work at good relationships all year with family and friends, nothing's going to change



They followed
the star.
We follow
the Son.

followers of Christ meet at
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miraculously on December 25th.

Christmas should be the pinnacle of our connection with God and those we love, not a replacement for a constant relationship that takes real time and effort. If we try to make the holiday a time of love, giving and good will when those things are missing the rest of the time, bad things happen. Yes, sometimes pain and suffering last a long time. Sometimes they stay only for a season. More often than not, that season is Christmas.

The holidays are especially painful for those grieving a loved one through death or divorce, or those who don't have much of a family; those who feel they've lost everything, and those with nothing or no one to lose. For them, Christmas becomes a hollow day, not a holiday. A day in which they feel excluded, even more than usual. Most of us are so caught up in the seasonal tsunami to even notice.

Even when we're in a good place, there's precious little time for thinking about God, our blessings, or what we're able to give up or give back. The only Silent Night is after the stores close Christmas Eve following the annual orgy of overindulgence. Even then it's only temporary. With Boxing Day comes another flurry of deals, discounts and crushing debt and, in a matter of weeks, we go from Carol of the Bells to Carol of the Bills.

But, as in the beginning, the best gift of all will still cost you nothing, and everything, at the same time. Nothing because you can't do anything to earn or deserve God's forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. Everything because living a life of gratitude and service will mean sacrificing your time, your energy, and your rights.

This Christmas, leave the bedlam behind. Find perspective and peace of mind by remembering Jesus came to die for our sins and spare us from God's justifiable anger over our constant rebellion. Refuse to get caught up in the hype and hypocrisy of the holi-daze. Count your blessings and make time this year to worship God and say thanks.

Don't spend more than you have. Make a deal with your loved ones who don't need anything to put the money where it can do so much more good. Resolve now to improve your relationships every day, spending yourself — and not your money — on the people you love. Even when others sell out, don't buy in.

Rick Gamble