

Christmas Day

'If only we could get back to the real meaning of Christmas?' Wouldn't we be rich, if we had a pound for every time we heard that? But what *is* the real meaning of Christmas. We've just read the two accounts in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. We know the story so well, but what does it all *mean*?

Well, there's a verse, tucked away in the Bible, in a place you wouldn't expect which, I believe, sums up the whole meaning of Christmas in just eleven words in Greek. This verse comes in a passage where St Paul is speaking about generosity. He wants the richer Christians to support the poorer ones. The passage is *2 Corinthians 8* on p1162 ... and in the middle of Paul's exhortation to great generosity he gives us this precious little nugget in v9:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes, he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

What a verse! So much is packed into it, and all so neat:

'though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.'

What does it mean, 'though he was rich'? Jesus didn't become God. He was *always* God. St John's gospel begins:

In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and Word was God ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

And yet God stooped down to sinful man to *become* a man, born of a Virgin in a filthy stable. 'Though he was rich, yet, for our sakes, he became poor'. God didn't become man just by way of a teaching aid. This actually tells us something about God's very *nature*; that he would *want* to stoop down to us

sinners in mercy. What does that *tell* us about this great God? And notice that great Biblical word 'Grace' in our verse. Only Christianity has this notion of Grace: that God does great things for those who don't deserve it. 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes, he became poor.'

'Yet for *your* sakes'. God emptied himself of his glory and majesty; he stooped down from the highest height to our lowly level, for *our* sakes, for the sake of sinners, for the sake of those who reject him, and turn away from him. 'Yet for your sakes, he became poor'.

But all this was for a reason. It wasn't just to shew solidarity with us. It was to accomplish a specific job: 'so that you, through his poverty, might become *rich*'. God wants us to be rich. Now, of course, this doesn't mean that he wants us all to win the lottery. (Actually, I see many people who have won *millions* on the Lottery, and they are not a bit rich. They're miserable and lost. You see, we all need a purpose in life, don't we? We need a reason to get out of bed. In fact, the longer I live, the more I realise that the best bit is actually the *struggle*. Now give a person £5 million out of the blue, and you've effectively given him a death sentence).

God wants us to be rich in the real sense of the word. He wants us to be happy, to be relaxed and confident about life. He wants us to be at peace with him, at peace with one another, and at peace with our own conscience. He wants us to be fulfilled, content, without fear or regret. He wants us to be healthy, in body and in mind. He wants our relationships to

be good. He wants us to look back without regret, to enjoy the present moment, and to look forward with hope and confidence. Now *that's* what it means to be rich.

I see so many people living shrivelled up little lives. Their bodies are either shrivelled up or bloated, their faces sad, mean-looking or frightened. Some have built a wall around themselves, or they have that completely defeated look about them. Relationships have gone wrong, and they're never going to trust anyone again. Sometimes I see lonely, pleading little eyes, and, time and again, expressions of such incredibly low expectations of life. What poverty of expectations of life!

Then there are bodies ruined by smoking, drugs, alcohol abuse, or by lack of exercise and dreadful diets, despite the billions of pounds spent over decades on health education. They once had lovely bodies. God have them lovely little bodies when they were young. What a waste!

And our culture is awash with filth, and violence, and everything that is sordid and squalid. So-called 'stars' are paid millions to give us this filth. This is what we value.

But God did not intend this for us. This is what the Devil wants for us, and he is winning hearts and minds. God intended every one of us to be *rich*. Sadly people have tried to get rich but without God. It can't be done, for only in *his* presence is fulness of joy, and only at *his* right hand are pleasures for evermore, according to *Psalms* 16.11.

Jesus, the Son of God, became poor, so that we might become rich. He came to earth to bring us back to heaven. Memorise this verse; it gives the true meaning of Christmas.