

# As good as a feast

Finding Joy in Enough at Christmas by **Ruth Grayson**

It's autumn again. School is back. The shops are filling up with their winter stock. And even though the actual day is still months away, most are already displaying Christmas decorations and ideas for gifts, too.

Are you looking forward to Christmas? Or do you dread it? I have mixed feelings. While I look forward to the day itself, I dislike the frantic few weeks beforehand. And it isn't just the commercialisation of the season. Too many Churches tend to pack in extra services, children's events and carol singing as if there will be no tomorrow after December 25th.

Yet this is theological nonsense. Christ's coming among us does not begin with our Christmas shopping or end after Church on Christmas Day. Despite the meaning behind the event, the day itself tends to be celebrated as a gift exchange for everyone, focusing on the Christmas tree rather than on the crib. It has become more of a shopping bonanza than a religious festival.

Christmas, rightly, is associated with generous giving. It commemorates the sacrificial gift by God to us of unconditional love through His Son, a gift to pass on to others in our turn. But this should not mean mindless spending, far less incurring massive debts in the process. Jesus came "To bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18), not to make us poorer. Not even the most expensive world cruise can compare with this priceless gift.



But we have managed to translate it into a very different kind of giving. Especially in the last half century the rise of the consumer society, the growth of the retail sector, the spread of cashless purchasing, and the availability of easy credit, have all played a part. We can buy now, pay later – and the manufacturers, retailers and advertisers exploit it to the full.

The six weeks or so before Christmas alone account for roughly one-third of total annual retail sales in this country. Our total seasonal spending – not just on gifts but on food, travel, parties, entertainment and other items such as cards and decorations – amounts to billions of pounds every year. The overall sum has shown an inexorable

rise this century, despite the financial crises and so-called austerity of recent years. It equates to roughly £800 per household, or individual adult spending in the order of £300 each. Many people will begin their shopping for Christmas this year before they have finished paying for the last one.

Christmas is also a time of great loneliness for many, often exacerbated by the illusion that everyone else is having a good time. Personal debt increases, and with it depression. It is also a stressful time for many families and relationships. The two weeks following Christmas are the busiest in the entire year for lawyers specialising in divorce cases.



have a better time, if everyone is less busy and less stressed. And even in the midst of the commercialism, we may find inspiration. Rudolph, that symbol of consumerism, was used by Santa to take presents to children who would not otherwise have had them. Children can be challenged to think of ways that they too can give gifts to the homeless or destitute, and to have fun doing it. They often have a better sense of fairness and justice than we do. See “Rudolph to the Rescue” at [www.christmasgiving.net](http://www.christmasgiving.net)

No, I'm not a killjoy! I want everyone to enjoy Christmas. The Bible gives us

All of which has nothing to do with the meaning of Christmas! Even though I am sure that most *Green Christian* readers are not big seasonal spenders, I am also sure that we could do more individually and collectively to get the message across that Christmas is not about spending money, and that we might all enjoy it more if we approach it differently. The CAScaid campaign ([www.christmasgiving.net](http://www.christmasgiving.net)) seeks to raise awareness about this issue.

The Bible tells us to prepare for the coming of Christ not by acquiring more, but by sharing what we already have. In Luke 3:11, John the Baptist admonishes his followers to prepare for their coming encounter with the Messiah by doing just that. And in Matthew 25:40, Jesus says exactly the same thing to His disciples to anticipate His return. We should remember that the original purpose of Advent was to prepare for the second coming of Christ, not for his birth. Our preparations for both events should actually be similar.

But this does not mean *not* having fun and enjoying ourselves at Christmas. It begins with sharing our own joy, as the shepherds did in Luke's account of the nativity. One way of doing this may be

to keep our churches open and to celebrate together more during the traditional “12 Days of Christmas”, inviting the local community in. And if this means having fewer events and services before December 25th, so be it. The Church could be a place of calm and tranquillity during Advent, rather than reflecting the external frenzy. Like its individual members, it needs to be seen to be countercultural, setting trends rather than following them.

For ourselves, we can begin by taking control of our own budgets, before even beginning to spend any money in the pre-Christmas season. If we take John the Baptist's advice literally, this could mean setting aside a substantial proportion of those budgets, and donating at the outset the amount saved to an appropriate charity or cause. For most of us, this will still leave “an ample sufficiency” for our own enjoyment.

But while adults may understand this, what about our children? They too will

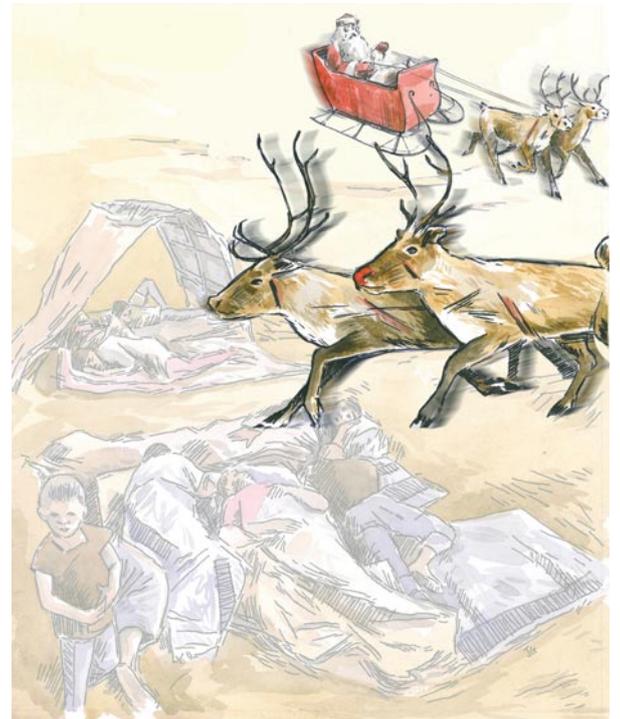


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guidance on how to do it. Sharing what we already have is one way forward. Reallocating our budgets to prioritise charitable giving is another. If we really want to find Joy in Enough, Christmas is a good time to begin.



Ruth Grayson is the author of *Reviving Advent, Reclaiming Christmas*, Grove Books Ltd (2015). Further ideas and information may be found through CAScaid at [www.christmasgiving.net](http://www.christmasgiving.net). Illustrations are © CAScaid.