

Notice what Jesus says – he has come to bring people: *“Life to the full”*.

I guess many of us reject the kind of religion that we see around us – much of it false or misguided – because we see that it makes people less lively, not more. We’re right to be suspicious of it.

But Jesus says that the very reason he was born on the first Christmas Day was so that he could deliver to us a precious gift – *Life in all its fullness*. A life that we have been starved of because we’ve lost connection with God, who is the Giver of all life. The way Jesus gives us that life is by laying down his own. By dying in our place.

His life for ours

And the life that is given to those who follow the good shepherd isn’t just about having a better life now; or feeling better about ourselves; or even about having something to support us through difficult times. It’s so much bigger than that.

It’s an end to the selfishness that enslaves us; it’s forgiveness for all that we have thought, said and done; it’s a new beginning in life with a new family and a new purpose and a new and caring leader who went through hell for us, and will never let us down.

Oh, and did we mention that it goes on for ever?

Because, just as Jesus rose from the grave three days after he had been killed by those “good religious people”, so he guarantees that he will lead his sheep through death to eternal life.

If you’re not that keen on religion – you’re in the best company there is. Jesus the good shepherd wants you to know that he came at Christmas to give you life to the full. Why not check it out?

A CHRISTMAS PRAYER FOR THE UNSURE

Dear God, I don’t even know if you’re there.

But I want to know the truth about you, about life and about eternity.

So please help me to discover the truth as I look into the life of Jesus Christ, whose birth we remember at Christmas.

Help me to be honest about what I find in him, and what his teachings say about me.

And help me to have the courage to respond to what I discover, and find life to the full.

Amen

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Christmas – love it! Christianity – not so sure...
Christmas is all about fun and life; but religion seems a bit boring and restrictive. I can do without it.

If that's the way you think, then you're not alone. Closed or thinly-attended churches show that many, many people agree. But there's someone else who agrees that religion is a waste of time. And it might surprise you to know who it is.

Jesus.

Of course Jesus would love Christmas – who wouldn't enjoy their own birthday! But it may surprise you to discover that Jesus had a loathing and hatred of religion that goes way beyond the hatred even of some modern atheists. The biographies of Jesus in the Bible – the Gospels – tell us how he regularly took on the top religious leaders of his day; how he exposed the brutal truth about them in front of the crowds. He called them blind guides, hypocrites, power hungry, greedy snakes and rotten to the core. And he twice stormed into the Jerusalem temple and smashed up the furniture. Powerful stuff!

To get the flavour of it, just imagine walking into St Paul's Cathedral on Easter Sunday when it's filled with people, kicking over the tables at the back, smashing up the bookstall, and ordering the tourists out. You can't get more anti-religious than that!*

Hates religion, but loves...

It's clear that Jesus is anti-religion – but he wasn't anti-God. Far from it. The reason he hated religion so much was that he knew it was keeping people *away* from God – not leading them towards God as it should.

People then, like today, had turned religion into a system of man-made rules that were a burden and a bore to people. They had taken the words of our joy-filled, life-giving, life-loving Creator and made them into a heavy weight to hang around people's necks. Faith in God should have been liberating and wonderful. But they made it into a tool for keeping people nailed down.

No wonder then that the ordinary people flocked to hear Jesus talk about a God who loved them. No wonder that the religious guys of the day got jealous of his popularity and wanted to pick holes in him. No wonder it ended the way it did, with the upstart preacher being nailed down himself – to a cross.

*Trust us, we're not making this stuff up - grab a Bible and read John 2 v 13-16 and Matthew 23 - it's all in there!

The Good Shepherd

Jesus did an amazing miracles. On one occasion he took a man who had been blind from birth and made him see. The religious types turned up and started to try and pick holes. "*It's not the same man*" (it was). "*It's all a trick*" (it wasn't). "*Your power is from the Devil*" (quite the opposite).

Jesus then starts to tell a simple story about shepherds and sheep. He says that there are some rubbish shepherds out there who don't care about the sheep and just run away when the wolves come. In fact they are no better than robbers and thieves. But there's a *good shepherd* who looks after the sheep, who cares for them, who is willing even to lay down his life for them.

What Jesus meant was clear. The useless shepherds were the religious leaders who were just looking out for themselves. They weren't fit to lead anyone. But the one the sheep recognise, the one the sheep follow, the one the sheep know has their best interests at heart, the good shepherd – that's me, says Jesus:

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John chapter 10 verses 10-11)

