

MY KIND OF CHRISTMAS

Every kid wakes early for Christmas, but I woke with the sunshine blazing through the curtains. Christmas is, after all, one of the longest days of the year. In Australia anyway.

Breakfast was a sickly mix of tropical fruit and Cadbury's Roses. Having coated my face in a mango-chocolate glaze, I'd pull on my Sunday best – a surfer T-shirt / board shorts combo (*ironed* for special occasions) – and we'd head to church.

Afterwards it was presents and then lunch. Usually some kind of roast. Not turkey, of course. No one chooses turkey unless compelled by centuries of peculiar tradition. Freed from the constraints of custom, Australians are able to see turkey for what it is: the food equivalent of a dehumidifier, sucking the moisture out of every cell in your body. Most Australians have ditched turkey since it has all the texture – but none of the flavour – of cotton wool.

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Of course, having rid ourselves of turkey, the whole traditional Christmas lunch then falls apart. Soon you realise that every other component had only been drafted in to make the bird edible. Gravy *and* stuffing *and* cranberry sauce *and* bread sauce – bread sauce! – all exist merely to wash down this Death Valley made flesh. In the old world, Brussels sprouts – those fetid parcels of chewy methane – can almost be justified for their moisture content. Lose the turkey, though, and it's a whole new world of possibilities.

So for lunch we would have lamb, or beef, or seafood, or a barbecue, or anything but turkey. We would pull our crackers, don our paper crowns, tell terrible jokes and eat till we burst. Then burst we did, outside for a swim, before hours of backyard cricket and finally a classic Australian carol:

*Jingle bells, jingle bells,
Jingle all the way,
Christmas in Australia
On a scorching summer's day.
Jingle bells, jingle bells,
Christmas time is beaut.
Oh what fun it is to ride
In a rusty Holden ute.¹*

Standard stuff really. Unless you're a Brit, in which case you're recoiling violently from the page, howling, 'Wrong! Make him stop! He's ruining Christmas!' I'm guessing that's your reaction because, having lived half my life in the UK, I've learnt the limits of British tolerance.

You Brits are an understanding bunch – perhaps the most tolerant in the world. You manage to forgive so much: *Neighbours* (remember Bouncer's dream sequence?), The Wiggles, Dannii Minogue (once again, we're sorry, please accept Kylie as a peace offering). Yes, Britons will forgive a lot, but one thing the Brits seem to find inconceivable is a summer Christmas.

And you know what? I think you might be on to something. Blazing sunshine is not the right context for Christmas. Proper Christmas happens 'in the bleak midwinter'.

CHRISTMAS IN THE DARK

I'm not just saying this to regain the favour of turkey-loving Britain. I'm genuinely convinced on this one: Christmas is a winter celebration. I don't really mean the weather. I do mean the mood. Whatever the hemisphere, whatever the climate, there is something inescapably wintry about Christmas – at least, according to the Bible.

In this book we're going to explore a famous Christmas reading – it gets wheeled out at all the traditional carols services, it is sung (twice!) during Handel's *Messiah*, and it predicts the birth of Jesus 700 years ahead of time. Here's the place of Christmas according to the Old Testament prophet Isaiah:

*The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.*

— **Isaiah 9:2**

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Christmas begins in darkness. Isaiah mentions it twice in one sentence – the second time he calls it ‘deep’ darkness. Yes, a light dawns but, as we’ll see, it comes from out of this world. Darkness is the context.

The rest of the Bible agrees. Eavesdrop, even briefly, on a carol service and you’ll hear repeated references to darkness. The popular Bible readings are full of darkness imagery. In the original telling of the story, Christmas happens with people huddling together in the gloom. It’s not about reflecting the brightness of our sunny circumstances. Christmas, according to the Bible, belongs in a land of deep shadow.

That’s important to remember at Christmas, especially because it can be such a difficult time. If you’re ill, unemployed, broke, single, divorced, depressed or in any other way transgressing Our Festive Expectations, Christmas can be really rough. In a 2010 survey 18% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘I dread Christmas’.² In another survey it was revealed that 19% ‘hate’ Christmas parties.³ For many of us, Christmas is anything but the most wonderful time of the year. Every relational fracture is exacerbated, every family breakdown is exposed and

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every pang of bereavement is given fresh oxygen. Half a million UK families will have an empty chair at Christmas lunch because they've lost someone this year. Christmas doesn't seem to help at these times but only to hurt.

If you are finding Christmas particularly hard, Isaiah assures you: you're not alone. The true context for Christmas is darkness. But what do we do about it?

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This book is about four responses to the darkness. We're exploring four kinds of Christmas, but each kind of Christmas represents an approach to life too – a way of handling the brokenness of this world.



1. SCROOGE

A Scrooge says, 'Yes, darkness is all around. And it always will be. Act accordingly.'

2. SHOPPER

A Shopper says, 'The light is going out so let's celebrate while we can.'

3. SANTA

A Santa says, 'Darkness? What darkness?' They choose to believe that all is light.

4. STABLE

The Stable preaches the original Christmas message. Here we take the darkness seriously, but by entering it we are offered the brightest future.

The four kinds of Christmas illustrate four ways that we handle the struggles of life. Which do you lean towards? You can always take the test at www.fourkindsofchristmas.com and find out.

On one level, all this is just a bit of fun. On another, there's nothing more serious. Really we're asking the big questions: what is the

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world really like? Where are we headed? And how should we live in response? The four kinds of Christmas are four approaches to life, and as we go through them I'd love you to be thinking: which am I? Which do I want to be? And what *is* the best approach to the darkness?

Let's begin with someone right at home in the darkness ...

1. SCROOGE



'Darkness is cheap,' observed Charles Dickens in *A Christmas Carol*, 'and Scrooge liked it.' Ebenezer Scrooge had a ruthlessly consistent approach to the darkness. He looked out on a bleak world, looked ahead to a bleak future and lived accordingly. Listen as he spreads his own brand of Christmas cheer: 'Every idiot who goes about with "Merry Christmas" on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart.' Dickens depicts a man thoroughly adapted to the dark: 'External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him.

No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty.'

Here is one way of handling the darkness: make your home in it. Become just as bitter as your bitter circumstances and say, 'Bah! Humbug!' to Christmas. That's an approach to Christmas, and it's an approach to life. Do you know Scrooges? Are you a Scrooge?

I am. A bit. Alright, I can be a lot of a Scrooge at times. If I'm honest, the darkness is not just 'out there', in my wintry circumstances. It's also 'in here', in my heart. When life gets hard, I get harder. When things turn gloomy, so do I. And when the lights come on, I'm not always that keen to brave the brightness.

Every nightclub owner knows this. How do they get rid of their punters at closing time? How do they end the mystique which would otherwise lock burgeoning lovebirds in a doe-eyed embrace forever? Simple. Turn on the lights. Pimples, wrinkles and bloodshot eyes are all lit up and the romance is killed instantly. In the darkness it's easy to pretend. In the light our true selves – warts and all – become known. And, as T.S. Eliot wrote,

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'Humanity cannot bear very much reality.'⁴

What if God is a dazzling source of light and life? This is how the Bible describes him. And what if he's calling you on to the dance floor, calling you to draw near? How do you react?

If you're anything like me, your knee-jerk response is to shrink back and hide in the shadows. In the dark we can do what we want. In the gloom we won't be bothered, or shown up, or held to account. That's why the darkness doesn't just happen to us. We also choose it.

Do you ever wonder why Christmas can be so strained at times? We are surrounded by the people we love the most and yet they are the ones we speak to *most* harshly. We reserve our worst behaviour, our bitterest words, our ugliest selfishness for those we call our 'loved ones'. What are we like? If you ask me, there's not only darkness around us in our suffering circumstances; there's also darkness within us in our selfish hearts.

And if this isn't bad enough, Isaiah points out the deepest kind of darkness – the darkness of death. The old King James translation puts it memorably. We are: 'they that dwell in the land of the shadow

of death' (Isaiah 9:2). That's our situation. Mount Doom towers over us, overshadowing all we do. This creeping oblivion – death – will claim us all. And Merry Christmas to you and yours!

Yes, I know, this is a bit 'Bah! Humbug!' right now. But that's the point. As with *A Christmas Carol*, the best stories begin with a problem. And according to the Bible, this is ours – we're in a pit, groping in the dark. There's an incredible happy ending, I promise, but right now we need to face facts.

What do you think? Is there any truth to this? Is darkness a fair summary of our human problem? If so, what's a good response? Probably none of us want to follow Scrooge. So what about a more popular kind of Christmas ...

2. SHOPPER



If Scrooge believes it's darkness now and darkness forever, the Shopper says, 'Don't be so gloomy! Stoke the fires, let's celebrate!' The Christmas Shopper wears the gaudiest seasonal knitwear, the novelty reindeer socks and the mistletoe headband. They raise their glasses of festive refreshments and wish everyone 'A Very Happy Winter.' The Shopper is not religious – they've given up on Jesus and church (along with Father Christmas and fairy stories). Without such beliefs they figure that this life is all there is, so they try to make the most of it. 'Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die' is their unofficial motto.