



**CHRISTMAS
CRACKER**



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MARCUS
NODDER

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A bad joke, a paper crown and some nail clippers

Traditional Christmas food really is quite strange.

Not wine but hot wine. Not chicken but something often drier and less tasty. Not normal vegetables but tiny squashed cabbages. Not bread but liquid bread. And then the whole lot again two hours later in a sandwich!

But who on earth looked at Christmas dinner and said, 'I know what this meal needs: a bad joke, a paper crown, and some nail clippers!?' That's the kind of thing you find inside the crackers which are such an established part of the Christmas tradition in the UK. Yet these three things actually help us get to the bottom of what Christmas is really all about.

The joke

Ha! Ha! Ha!

Groan...

The joke

Christmas crackers are famous for their groan-inducing festive gags.

The jokes are appallingly bad. Ones like, 'What do you get if you eat Christmas decorations?' Answer: 'tinselitis!' Or, 'What carol do they sing in the desert?' Answer: 'O camel ye faithful!' Or, 'What do you get when you cross a snowman with a vampire?' Answer: 'frostbite!' Or, 'What do you call Santa's little helpers?' Answer: 'subordinate clauses!'

A study of people from ten major professions tested their responses to cracker jokes. There were three categories of reaction: an audible laugh, a smile, or no reaction at all. Those most likely to laugh out loud were funeral directors, which pretty much says it all. I guess in that job you'll laugh at anything!

But for many people the joke is God. The very idea of God is a joke, and not a particularly funny one. If you even mention God, you find the same cracker joke reaction: they either laugh out loud, or just smile with pity, or groan, or look at you blankly. It is seen as the old God delusion, or the imaginary friend in the sky, or the projection of the desire for a heavenly father figure to care for us.

The very first line of the Bible, though, says, 'In the beginning God created'. And that is echoed in the first line of John's Gospel, which says, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word



was God.’ The Bible doesn’t try to prove God is there – it doesn’t have to. It says we already know full well that God exists.

The created world shouts of a Creator to us – whether it’s the wonder of a newborn baby, or the majesty of a starlit sky, or the complexity of a human cell. We know that pure chance and any amount of time could not have produced this. And we feel in our hearts a longing for God, because we were made by him and for him.

As if that evidence were not compelling enough, John’s Gospel continues to say this: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory’.¹ God became man. As the carol

¹ John 1:1, 14

‘Once in Royal David’s City’ puts it, ‘He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all’.

Some people may dismiss Jesus as a joke, but if we reckon today’s date from this man’s birth, clearly something rather significant happened 2000 years ago – give or take a little. In fact John’s Gospel is a first-century, eyewitness testimony: ‘The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory’ (my italics). It’s not fantasy but fact; not writing stories but recording history.

The Faber Book of Reportage is a fascinating collection of eyewitness testimonies of historical events – the death of Socrates in 399 BC; the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79; dinner with Attila the Hun in AD 450. The editor, John Carey, writes in the introduction, ‘One advantage of insisting on eyewitness

evidence is that it makes for authenticity. All knowledge of the past derives ultimately from people who can say, "I was there."

Well, John was there at the time of Jesus' life on earth. And his eyewitness testimony dates from the first century. It's not a fictitious story on a par with *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, or *Aesop's Fables*, or even a modern collection of *365 Bedtime Stories*. It's worth taking seriously. It's worth a read.

Imagine that all of reality is a large house. The house has an upstairs and a downstairs. The downstairs is the physical, material world in which we live – what we see and sense, such as nature, science and matter. The upstairs is spiritual reality – God, along with ultimate truth and justice and beauty. The dominant worldview in modern Western culture is what's called 'secular humanism'. Its working assumption is that

we do not have any way of really knowing what is upstairs. And so it argues that any claims about anything upstairs are just personal, non-provable opinion. That's why people say, 'If you believe, that's fine for you, but it's purely your personal taste and opinion. Don't try and impose it on me. There's no point even discussing it.'

But what if there were a staircase joining the upstairs to the downstairs? And what if God had come down that staircase and lived among us as a person? What if he had done miracles to prove he was from upstairs? What if that man were this Jesus whom John knew personally? Then you would have something to investigate and explore. Then belief in God and Jesus wouldn't just be a non-rational leap of faith and your private opinion.

The  crown

The crown

The second thing you find in a cracker is a paper hat in the shape of a crown.

It tells us something about God. It reminds us that not only is he there, for real, but he is the King, the Ruler. The opening of John's Gospel tells us that he made everything, so he rules everything. He's the giver of light and life.² He wears the crown. And when he comes to earth as a man, he comes as King. Later in John chapter 1, someone says, 'We have found the Messiah (that is, the Christ).'³ The Messiah or Christ was the promised King who would defeat God's enemies, rescue God's people, and rule over the eternal kingdom of God.

² See John 1:3–4.

³ John 1:41

We may wonder what is the purpose of life? Why are we here? Is it just to work, eat, sleep and die? No, we were made for God and to live with him as King of our lives – to know him, love him, and serve him. That is the point of life.

But the paper crown also tells us something about ourselves. It reminds us what has gone wrong. The BBC

America website has a page headed '10 ways to British up your Christmas holiday'. It's for Americans who want to do things the British way. This is what it says about the crown in crackers: 'Everyone is a king



on Christmas! The paper crowns are made of tissue paper and unfold into an actual crown ... The paper hat was added to the crackers in the early 1900s and the tradition has carried on.'

The Bible says that is precisely the problem and what has gone wrong with our world: everyone is a king, and not just at Christmas. Although we take off the paper crowns as soon as we possibly can after Christmas dinner, we keep the crown of self-rule firmly on our heads through the year – throughout our lives. We don't want God ruling over us. We suffer from 'little emperor syndrome'. We put ourselves at the centre of our world; we want to call the shots; we want freedom to do our own thing. Therefore we reject God's loving rule, like a goldfish jumping out of the bowl in its bid for freedom.

John's Gospel says that this rejection of

God as King has plunged the world into darkness – spiritually and morally. It has put us on a course heading for eternal darkness, alienated from God's loving rule for ever.

But what about the 'Glad tidings of great joy I bring to you and all mankind' of which the carol 'While Shepherds Watched' declares? This description of our problem all sounds very much like bad tidings, not glad tidings. But that's to forget the nail clippers!

The
gift



The gift

The third item you find in a Christmas cracker is the gift.

Nail clippers, if you're lucky. A plastic frog, if you're not. You can of course receive more high-end gifts – if you're prepared to cough up £1000 for a set of six Fortnum & Mason crackers. But even then you're left holding a silver tiepin. Who wears tiepins anymore?!

Christmas is about God's gift to us – a gift that you're not going to find in a cracker. If you read through John's Gospel, you will see that in chapter 3 verse 16 it says, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'

God's present to us came gift-wrapped in a box – 'a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in

a manger', so Luke's Gospel tells us.⁴ Rather than being a useless plastic frog kind of gift, it is an exactly-what-we-need kind of gift:

a way back to God, provided by God himself.

Jesus came into the world to rescue us from the darkness of our wrongdoing and God's judgement on that, and to bring us into the light of relationship with God. He did this by dying on the cross, taking on himself the punishment that we deserve. The Bible says that when Jesus died '... the



⁴ Luke 2:12

punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.’⁵ And having died for us, Jesus was then raised to rule over us.

Because Jesus died in our place and faced God’s anger for us, it means that if we trust in him, we are not punished for rejecting God. Instead, we are forgiven and brought back to God, enjoying eternal life.

One desperately sad news article reported that a fourteen-year-old girl with cancer was given her dying wish: to have her body cryogenically frozen. In a letter to the judge presiding over her case she wrote, ‘I want to live and live longer, and I think that in the future they may find a cure for my cancer and wake me up. I want to have this

chance.’ Yet tragically the very thing this girl was longing for, and what we all long for, is what God has already offered us in Jesus: eternal life. This is not just waking up in a world 100 years from now, when you don’t know anyone, and then dying again, but rather being raised with resurrection bodies to live for ever with God and his people in a world made new.

Furthermore, this eternal life begins even now, because at the heart of eternal life is knowing God. It is becoming part of his family. It is knowing him as Father – even now. As John chapter 1 verse 12 says, ‘to all who did receive him [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.’

⁵ *Isaiah 53:5, in which the Old Testament prophet Isaiah foretells what Jesus will accomplish on the cross*

Ha! Ha! Ha!

Groan...



Christmas

cracker

So, then, the Christmas cracker really does take us to the heart of the Christmas message:

- **The joke**

is God really a joke? Is Jesus really just a poor gag? The eyewitness testimony of John says otherwise. At the very least, it's worth a read this Christmas time.



- **The crown**

God is King, but we stick the crown on our own heads. And because of this, the lights have gone out and the world has been plunged into darkness.



- **The gift**

In his love God has given his only Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us and take the punishment for our rebellion. Through Jesus God offers us eternal life – life with him and his people, now and for ever.



Every year in the UK there's the battle of the Christmas adverts among the supermarket chains. In 2016 the Sainsbury's one featured a frazzled father of two who is overwhelmed by work, commuting, and his growing to-do list for Christmas. The song he sings is called 'The Greatest Gift'. What he finally realises is: 'The greatest gift that I can give is me'.

If God made a Christmas advert, he'd say the same. The greatest gift he can give us is

himself. Knowing him is what he holds out to us in Jesus this Christmas time.

Christmas is a time for giving – but it's also a time for receiving. '... to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.' You could do so even now, by praying this prayer:

Lord God,

I believe you are the Creator and Ruler of everything.

I'm sorry for having lived my life as if I were the king.

Thank you for your gift of Jesus – to die for my wrongdoing and to offer me eternal life with you.

Please forgive me now and help me to live my life for you.

Amen