

CHRISTMAS

Next Sunday is what most Churches call the first Sunday in Advent, the beginning of the Festival of Christmas. The Churches are running late - as usual! In Exeter our Christmas Lights were switched on last week and our shop windows have been full of holly and snow since the end of October. So, what's wrong with that? It's all good fun and the kiddies love it, don't they?

Christmas took over the ancient feast of Yule, the darkest day of the year, but also the day when the sun started to come back again; a day which in Northern Europe has always been linked with feasting. What is our Christmas about nowadays? I think it is mainly about getting (not giving) presents, eating and drinking too much with, probably, James Bond on the Telly. Though that may be what we are expecting for ourselves, it won't be like that for all people, even in Devon. In Exeter alone, the St Petrock's Day Centre expects to be caring for 40-50 people who will have nowhere else to go, and they are only a small part of the local lonely and excluded.

Whatever else Christmas is for most of us, it is not a religious festival. What we will actually be doing over the next few weeks is worshipping Mammon, the personification of wealth and excessive consumption. We will be swept up in it, either as worshippers in person with our cards and cash or as acolytes who only wished they could join in. This is not just a new development of course. The ancient feasts around the winter solstice also involved a lot of eating and drinking and the early Church just converted them into Christmas as they similarly did with the Spring Equinox and Easter or Beltane (the Autumn Equinox) and All Saints Day. My feeling however about our contemporary Christmas is that the consumption has got out of hand and cannot but infect all of us.

I find it very calming to make a space on Christmas morning before we get fully into preparing our Christmas dinner, before we do too much present opening, to make a space to slow down, to recognise what is important in our lives; to recognise that all these other things, food, family, conviviality and presents are important, but not central. I want to meet with a few others to try and hear the still small voice which has been drowned out by the noise of selling. Traditionally Quakers do not recognise the Church Festivals, we try and treat all days as equally holy and important. But in spite of that several of us will be holding a Meeting for Worship on Christmas Day. We are doing this to give ourselves an opportunity to put aside the pressures we have experienced over the past weeks, to try and free ourselves from what we have allowed Christmas to become and to try and focus on what it could be.