

## Reflection Christmas Day 2024

### Introduction

Does Christmas with its messages of love, peace and goodwill bring out a better you or even the best in you?

We know that this is less likely than maybe we would like it to be - why? Because research has been done with those most amenable to Christmas – children

### **Illustration:** Beliefs and Behaviour (14 December 2024 New Scientist)

We know this from the latest research on Santa Claus. Does belief in Santa Claus encourage children to pro-social behaviour? Help them behave better than otherwise they might. Not really. Only in so far as they hang out with people who believe Santa should make you a better person then maybe there is evidence of some pro-social behaviour.

So, it is not belief in Santa that can make you live up to your beliefs - it is hanging out with other people who believe in Santa.  
Spoiler alert - latest research indicates that Santa is not real for many people.

### **Belief & Behaviour**

Research has been pretty consistent that belief doesn't impact on behaviour as one might wish or want - as Christian believers that is a just a little perturbing.

Devout people do good things consistent with their beliefs because the people around them share those beliefs.

- What we believe does not correlate as much as we would like with what we do.
- Who we believe with does correlate to what we will do.
- It's not belief but who you believe with that's most likely to impact your behaviour.

You may want to be good or better - sure have good beliefs and aspirations - but if you really want to be good or a better person then who you hang out with is crucial.

- Others really help you to live up to your beliefs.
- Others really help you be your better self.
- Others really help you be your brightest self.
- Others really help you be an interesting self.

Sometimes they will be your family, your neighbours, your friends, your workmates, your church members, your sporting and hobby club mates - sometimes not.

Of course hanging out with people that don't share enough of your outlook is not fun. We all know the stories of people reporting how getting together at Christmas with the family is little more than doubling down on everyone's foibles and miseries. Like visiting the dentist for family therapy - something we desperately want to avoid, except we can't figure out a way to avoid it so many of us suffer in begrudging silence.

So not all gangs are equal - so if you are in a gang whose beliefs are less than ideal or even tangential - the flip side is also true.

- Others really can help you to live down below your beliefs.
- Others really can help you be your lesser self.
- Others really can help you be your darker self.
- Others really can help you just be an inoffensive self.

### **Christmas Gang: Family Time**

So, beliefs do matter but if you want to take them seriously and benefit from them - what you believe is not enough, whom you believe them with is a bigger factor. This in part may explain why we do not live up to our beliefs - we have less chance of living our ideal beliefs if we don't hang out enough with those who likewise believe.

So, when we turn up to Boxing Day cricket we become better cricket lovers - when we gather here on Christmas Day, we remind each other of our beliefs & what is important. We gather on Xmas Day not because we are a better gang or cut above everyone else, rather we gather on Christmas Day because it is part of giving each of us our best chance of actually living out what's best & better for each other and all who share in our lives.

Life's natural attrition diminishes our gangs which lessens our chance to be good or bad - that is one reason why it is so sad that people find themselves alone at Christmas. Not because they're missing out on the froth & bubble that we are too easily distracted into thinking is the Christmas spirit - though seafood is next to Godliness! No - being alone at Christmas is denying ourselves the chance to catch up with a gang - there by the grace of God we all go. Without a gang it is really hard to give ourselves the best chance to bring out the best in ourselves and be your better self for each other & those whom

you share your life. The urge at Xmas to be with our gang, our family, with those whom we trust -is just one indicator we as humans aspire to bring out the best in each other.

### **Making a Difference at Christmas**

Christmas Day is about the birth of a child who brings us face to face with God. God's goodness among us as a child, God's mercy offered through a child. Whatever you make of the metaphysics of Jesus the message of the angels from God tells us right from the start who the God of Jesus is and what Jesus' God is like –

- a God of vulnerability not a God of religious imperialism
- a God who crosses the road into the modest not God as a religious prima donna
- reconciliation that crosses the road not demands self-satisfaction
- a God of growth not a God of simple perfection
- leading to new futures not one that closes horizons
- a God who walks in our foibles not a God who self protects
- who forgives our foibles not holds them against us.

This Jesus arrived back then and immediately God drew a gang around him –

- more than just his family
- there was also a gang of the shepherds with their tradie's heartiness
- there was also a gang of strangers from another land bring their wisdom
- there was also a bunch of ready-made pets to complete the picture perfect nativity.

Christmas through the baby Jesus is the time God invites you to hang out with God's gang to live for love, peace and goodwill, to bring out a better you or even the best in you and for each other.