

If you're an old humbug when it comes to Christmas, I entirely understand where you're coming from! In theory, there shouldn't be a festival for the birth of Jesus: he didn't ask us to do it and the way we celebrate it is anyway mostly to do with subsuming old pagan rites (a common practice of the early missionaries).

Whether or not to celebrate Christmas was one of the really hotly debated and fought over issues of the 17th century. In fact, in the lead up to Christmas 1647, a bitter dispute over the festival brought puritans to petition the mayor of Norwich to stop it, while the apprentices counter-petitioned. (I think the latter might well have been more interested in the partying!) At the same time there was a riot about it all in Ipswich, during which a man, ironically named Christmas, was killed. Further south in Canterbury, Christmas was outlawed and the people gathered on Christmas Day, demanding that the shops be closed and church services held. To cut a long story short, the argie-bargie spilt over into the 2nd English civil war, during which Christmas was banned as a royalist practice, only to be restored again with Charles II in 1660. Wow, such passion about church! No need to petition me, though: all our churches will have a celebration on Christmas Day - I know you'd be out in the streets rioting if that wasn't so!

In fairness, the anti-Christmas lobby has a good argument theologically and, without doubt, commercially. So why do I still argue for keeping it? On the simplest level, it is a good response to the murkiness of this time of year: looking for some brightness that will remind us of our Divine spark. We Christians see Jesus as illuminating our lives, our thinking, the path to God and to one another. So we like to remind ourselves of his coming into our world at a time we most need it. Christmas also recognises our commonality: if the Son of God is one of us - one with us - then surely we are equal in the sight of God. Christmas also brings a break from the hum-drum where we have the chance to wonder at our lives being shared with God.

Never mind the theological arguments or the pre-Christian symbols - celebrating Jesus' birth should bring the inspiration of God alongside us, joy in the elegant way God places Himself in Mary's trust, and the hope that we have another chance to carry this into another year. If it doesn't do that, perhaps your mince pie went down the wrong way; wash it down with a drink of Holy Spirit!