

In a recent conversation with a close relative who ‘converted’ to becoming a Jehovah Witness, the thorny issue of birthdays, and in particular Jesus’ birth came up. Categorically, I was told, “Christmas is pointless. It’s not in the bible. There is no mention of Jesus’ birthday. There is no calendar of events. You worship a lie. It’s just pointless commercialism.”

Talk about a Christmas Grinch! That certainly would seem to me to be “a heart two sizes small”! It is a level of cynicism that I can almost relate to, and in part, what he was saying to me is actually true.

Christmas, as we know it, is not in the Bible. The story of Jesus’ birth is, but no, there is no date given, only a few clues about times and seasons. And do I worship a lie? No...not at all. I asked the question “Was Jesus born of Mary in Bethlehem?” “Of course” came the reply. “The Bible says it’s so. Apart from the seers from the East, there were no presents. Nor are there any accounts of a party, except by Herod, and that ended badly for John the Baptist.”

‘O good...’ I thought, this is not getting any better. So, let’s not keep birthdays unless someone loses their heads, and totally write off the wise men story as being pagan and pointless. And what about the calendar?

Well, the calendar, as we know it, was last altered in the 15th century. Since the third century, the calendar of Julian had lost at least 14 days, so, by decree of the Pope Gregory XIII, it was changed to the calendar as we know it, together with leap years, and in 1582, October went from the 4th to the 15th overnight. Also tucked in there was the changing of the date of Christmas from March 25th to December 25th, and all other holy-days moved to enable the darkest, coldest and shortest part of the year to be a time of rest, not work.

England, fearful of anything coming out of Rome, didn’t adopt the changes until the mid 18th century! Greece only got there in 1923! Yes...we’ve always had different calendars and ideas. Even today, the Islamic and Jewish people keep different calendars, and the point is, well, there is no point. It’s all pointless. To

have an argument on this line is to ask the question “which is better, centimetres or inches?” The answer is really up to you.

Now...did you hear me say something really strange in there, like, Christmas was changed to December 25th from March 25th? Yes – I did say that. In fact, for many centuries, it was celebrated on March 11th! Add 14 days... March 25th. Do we know when Jesus was born?

Well, let’s look at what the Bible tells us, and then, aligning all the calendars in use at the time: the stars, the moon, the sun, the seasons, the sheep, the shepherds, and whatever the Greeks were up to, and try and work it out! Now that’s a lot of calendars to worry about! It makes about much sense as asking do your use a PC or a Mac, an Android or an iPhone, or should pineapple ever be placed on pizza!

There were too many ways of looking at it, but the Bible, written mainly from a Jewish point of view uses the seasons and the 13 lunar-months of the moon to give us some clues. In the Gospel of Luke, he tries to give us a time by naming who was ruling at the time. No year is given, but from what we can work out, it places the birth of Jesus around 4 to 7 years before the Common Era (also known as AD). The common era, CE or AD is nothing more than an historical bookmark to place a fixed time:

The next clue Luke gives us is this: there were shepherds on the plain, keeping their sheep. Jesus said we all know how to interpret the seasons, and that’s pretty right. If it was summer, the grass would have died off, so, there was no point bringing the sheep down on the plain. Towards the end of winter, and into the early spring, the grass is greener due to the rains, so, it would make sense to bring the sheep down then. Jesus was probably born in spring.

Okay, next part of our pointless journey: when is it Springtime in Bethlehem? Back to our calendar, usually that is late April to early July. August is summer and usually very hot and dry. My head begins to spin now...not December 25th then? Then what is the point?

I went back to my JW family member and asked a question. Do you take the day off on the second Monday of June? “Yes. It’s a holiday.” “Second Monday of March?” “Yes, of course. It’s important to remember the establishment of the 8 hour day.” “Hmm...not Moomba?” “No, that would be pagan.” Moomba Moomba! Time for some fun!

So...you are happy to remember the important event of granting of working rights? “Yes...it helps us to remember what was done to make our society what it is.” I nodded. And how about the June long-weekend. “Well, it’s the Queen’s birthday, but it is good to have a rest in winter. A time to refresh.” Hmm...the Queen’s birthday? “Well, it is also good to remember we live in a constitutional monarchy.” But you don’t vote... “Erhh...” And what’s more, her birthday is April 21st. You don’t celebrate birthdays. “Erhh...”

Whoa! What’s going on?! This is the point of the pointless argument. It is about remembering what God has done. God, knowing that things were not as right as they could be risked everything and became one with us. God, by being born, is with us. God, in the birth of Jesus, entrusted to Mary and Joseph, experienced the fullness of our human life, even to the point of death. And not letting death overcome this journey of life, made it so that through Jesus, we can remain one with our loving God. Our loving God is always with us.

Every day is Christmas Day. Every day is Easter Day. Every day is GOD’s Day. So to help us remember this each year, we set aside one day that reminds us of what God did for us. What date was it: who knows! Too many calendars for my liking! What does matter is the reason behind the day, not the day itself. To worry about the date, well, that’s pointless. What is not pointless is the reason for the season.

God, when working with Moses, said to the people of Israel, it is good for you to have a rest from time to time. Six days you work, and on the seventh, you rest. Every seventh year take a break. Every 50th year, celebrate all year long. The rest is given to you to remember what I have done for you, and the good this rest is for you. Celebrate. Love. Give. Rest.

It matters not what the date is, the point is that we do just that. Up there, where they walk the right-way up, so they think, it is winter. It is cold. The days are short. It is a good time to keep warm and be happy. Down here, a winter feast is pointless, but we have our own reason to rest and take shelter. The holy days we keep allow us to keep out of the heat and danger, and to be with the ones we love. And why do we do this? We do it because in the greatest gift of love, God is with us. God is loving us and through Jesus, keeping us with him for ever. This is the point of Christmas. It is a time of rest, and a time of celebration.

God's love has no beginning or end: it is all around us. Maybe that makes God's love pointless because it just is what it is. Love.

And love came down and lived amongst us. That to me is all that matters.

May you share this love with those whom you love this Christmas, and let that love be shared with all whom you meet.