

MESSY CHRISTMAS

Interview with Pastor Noel Due, Celia Fielke & Pastor Richard Fox

Richard: What's Christmas like for you? Do you look forward to it? Or would you rather avoid it? Is it possible to still enjoy the peace hope and joy of Christmas even in the mess?

Richard: How do you celebrate Christmas?

Celia: I love Christmas. I love getting the fairy lights out. It doesn't feel like Christmas to me until I have all the decorations up. You know, the colourful things and the Christmas tree. We always have a real Christmas tree because that's my husband's tradition and baking honey biscuits.

Noel: Oh I remember the honey biscuits. My Mum used to put them in the cupboard and we'd find them before Christmas and we'd nick a few. I hope she never counted them.

Richard: I remember the Christmas pageants and going along as a child and witnessing the Christmas pageants that used to roll through. Getting all the goodies and being a part of the Christmas atmosphere as the town and the community got right in amongst it.

Noel: But it probably wasn't just the pageant was it? It was actually being with the family, with your mum and dad, with your brothers and sisters.

Richard: But Christmas isn't like that for everyone is it?

Celia: No. At home I've got a friend of mine, and it was just last year, she actually booked a family holiday up to far north Queensland for two weeks over Christmas and I couldn't understand it. But she sent me a photo of them on Christmas day sitting on the beach eating fish and chips, just her and her husband and their kids. I asked her 'why have you done this?' and she said she just wanted to get away from the pressure and the stress of Christmas.

Richard: There's lots of demand and the expectation of what is Christmas really meant to be about.

Noel: The daughter of one of my friends many years ago was learning the Lord's Prayer and she used to say "forgive us our Christmas's as we forgive those who Christmas against us" and it's pretty much the way it is sometimes with the family difficulties and conflicts and the people you haven't spoken to for ages who you now have to be friendly to around the Christmas tree or the Christmas table. You know, it's a difficult time.

Richard: It is. It can be a really hard to deal with and really hard to face. I suppose also there's the reality that many people don't have loved ones around that table, they've died or just can't be there with them so there can be a lot of sadness too in there around Christmas and it actually reflects more on the absence of people.

Noel: Yeah. My first wife died of cancer and the first Christmas after that death was very strange for us. To know that she was not there but at the same time to know that her life still went on and she was still with us in many ways but the absence was very very profound. The first year after anyone loses a loved one everything is significant. The first anniversaries, first Christmas, first Easter, first birthday's, very difficult times to go through.

Richard: So how do you cope with something like that when your wife dies of cancer and where do you find hope especially at Christmas time?

Noel: Well I think the hope is actually in the Christmas story because the story is important, the story is telling us something. The story is telling us that God thinks we're worth something, the stories telling us that

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we matter, the stories telling us that he's with us because in the bible Jesus is called Immanuel, which means God is with us.

Noel: Even in the midst of all the grief and the pain, the sorrow and the messiness of the relationships, either the presence or the absence, it's the 'withness', God with us which is so important.

Celia: I think that's a really important message. I know a good friend of mine who at Christmas time finds it really hard going to the family Christmas but he says to me the feeling that Jesus gives him of his own worth, Jesus makes him feel worthy and worthwhile and good because the family that he spends Christmas with makes him feel so worthless I guess, so that's for him, why he gets through Christmas; that message of Jesus.

Richard: That's right. Often even at times as a parent I don't feel joy at Christmas. It's a lot of work to almost get it up for your kids to get this joy and this expectation of trying to make Christmas a happy time and it can be quite tiring and stressful and so I don't often feel that joy at Christmas. The thing I look forward to though is hearing that story again of that first birth of Jesus coming into the world and of Mary and Joseph there in that manger with all the smells and the animals and the pressure of having to travel to Bethlehem, not finding a place to stay, the stress and expectation of this baby coming into the world. And this baby was a special baby. As you said Noel, Immanuel, God is with us, here in this.

Celia: He came into a pretty messy situation, Jesus, didn't he?

Noel: Yeah well it wasn't just messy it was deadly. When Mary said "let it be done to me according to your word", she was yet not married and in that society and in that time, saying yes to God meant that she could be stoned to death. So it wasn't an academic question for her about how messy Christmas was it was about actual fear and anxiety and who knows what could have happened. Joseph certainly didn't know how to handle it did he?

Richard: No, he wanted to try and dismiss the whole thing and sweep it under the carpet. But I suppose it showed how Jesus entered into the messiness then and how he gave them joy by being there with them in this mess that was there in their life and to help guide them through it. I enjoy hearing the story of Jesus being there in that mess but then also in my messes so that when I struggle to face family members...

Celia: or the messes we have here, there's plenty of them, that Jesus is here.

Richard: And even in the absence of loved ones that there is someone who cares about me, sees me as worthy. Someone who loves me for who I am and even though I don't feel joy always at Christmas time he gives me that joy by hearing that story again that he lives with us.

Noel: In that sense I guess, Christmas is no different from any other time in that sense of Christ with us, that sense of us being worth it because of what he is and what he's done or who he is and what he's done. That's there all the time but Christmas is really important for us to be told it all over again because we forget so easily and we forget the important things really easily. There's a very famous old person that said "the words of Jesus are stronger on the lips of a friend than they are sometimes in our own heart" and we need to hear that story. It's so important that we hear that he has come, that he's come because he's loved us, that we're worth it and that he's given himself for us. We need to hear that and that's what makes Christmas so important for everybody.

Richard: Yes, and every day.

Richard: It was, yes. Getting everyone together in that space.

Celia: Just the fact that it was getting closer to Christmas, you had that sense of excitement. The Christmas pageants happening, it's that build up and preparation.

Noel: You're sort of counting off the days like an old advent calendar.