

A well-known British entertainer, Dave Allen, who used to appear on our screens at Christmas used to end his act with the words, "Goodnight, thank you, and **may your God go with you.**" ... a relatively *inoffensive* way to end his shows which usually contained words to upset *some* viewers! And yet his was an accurate observation - that for different people – God meant different things. Your God, he said.

That people are inclined to create their own gods was recognized by the Old Testament prophets who railed against those who worshipped images carved in wood. The apostle Paul condemned those "whose god is their belly." Both of these would have been critical of Allen's parting shot. It depends what sort of God you are talking about!

In this post-modern world with competing images of what is real, it is not surprising that people should have different ideas about what God is like. At Christmas time, most especially in the prosperous West, there's always a temptation to think of God as a kind of cosmic Santa Claus, a kindly and beneficent figure whose mission is to bring happiness to all and make us feel good.

Well of course God does bring *happiness* or more accurately *joy* which does not depend so much on circumstances. But there is much more to God. Whereas Santa Claus comes with a "Ho! ho! ho!" God comes as "Holy! Holy! Holy!"

This may be one of those areas where the prosperous west can learn from those in the poorer nations. Christmas in the developed world has become very commercialised. It's a mixed picture, not all bad, but it would be true to say that many Christians feel uncomfortable with what it has become.

The message of the first Christmas was that God was stepping into history and *revealing himself*. The key players in the nativity story, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds had an encounter with God in which he made himself known. When he grew up, Jesus said about himself, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." He was saying if you really want to know what God is like, look at me! He is Emmanuel – God with us.

So, Dave Allen's words did indeed have some relevance and some truth. For those whose God is the God of the first Christmas, He does indeed go with us, provided of course that we walk with Him! Many of us can testify that amidst the uncertainties of the past year, knowing that this Holy God was with us has been a huge source of strength and comfort.

And perhaps, if you live in one of the poorer parts of the world, and you're tempted to look at the wealthier nations and wish you lived somewhere else... perhaps you could say a prayer for us and ask our Heavenly Father that we won't be diverted and enticed away from the true significance of Christmas – that God came into the world as a man so that we could have a new life as his adopted children and play our part in the family business of sharing the gospel of reconciliation.