

Did you see this item in yesterday morning's paper? "Cross banned on state building." Dateline, Jackson, Mississippi: "A federal judge ruled Friday that the display of a 20-story lighted cross on a state building was unconstitutional and ordered an end to the nine-year Christmas tradition. . . . The state, seeking to allay concerns that it was favoring a religion, also displayed the form of a Christmas tree and the words 'joy' and 'peace' on the building, Gov. Bill Allain testified earlier Friday."

It seems like each year someone's Christmas display comes tumbling down because the message is offensive. I don't complain about this kind of thing. The courts are quite right that a state which allows many different religions can only do so if it espouses none of them. It's not the job of the state to proclaim the religious meaning of Christmas; that responsibility falls on other shoulders. Guess whose.

Actually, it'd be a lot easier if we let the state proclaim the message of Christmas. If they told everyone this is a season of peace and joy, it'd be less work for the rest of us. And for many of us, these last 10 days before Christmas are filled with other responsibilities. The Scrooge imprisoned within us would be happy just to get our work done before the 25th. It would be easier on us if state buildings bore a cross to remind us of the true meaning of Christmas.

The problem is that cross on a state building looks sterile. If the meaning of Christmas is to be proclaimed, it needs guts, it needs people who have experienced the peace and joy of the season.

When John the Baptist sat in his prison cell on death row, he wondered about the meaning of Christmas. He wondered was Jesus truly the Messiah. But to find the answer, John did not ask the ones who had imprisoned him, rather he asked disciples of Jesus. Jesus coached the disciples how to give the answer back to John. Jesus told them don't repeat the same words; tell John what you have seen and heard: the deaf hear, the lame walk, the poor have the Gospel. What John heard was no sterile message, he heard the message with guts. Not only is Jesus the Messiah, but these guys believe it. They carried a message no state could bring, they carried the message of their faith.

My brothers and sisters, people we meet need to know the meaning of Christmas. They need to know that this is a season of peace and joy. 100 Christmas cards won't convince them. A 96 foot tall Mayor's Christmas tree won't do it, 156,000 plaza Christmas bulbs won't do it. They need to know what John needed to know in prison: what we have seen and heard. That the poor in Kansas City have heat, that the hungry have food, that the homeless are treated with love, and that God became like us so that we can become like God. And that has made all the difference.

If you want to prepare your hearts for Christmas, make them restful, make them grateful for what God has done. And bring your heart with you everywhere you go this holiday season--to the office party, to your neighbor, and home for dinner. The world is like John in prison; it needs to hear the message not from buildings but from people whose hearts are filled with the authentic joy of the Gospel.