

How are you celebrating Christmas?

"Chestnuts roasting on an open fire..." well, no, that has never really been "Christmas for me"! But we all have traditions and habits which help to make the end of December feel like a special time of year, and growing up I was very attached to stockings, bacon rolls, carol services by candlelight, frost (usually in the absence of snow!) and so on.

When we moved to Benin, it was hard to know how to celebrate Christmas in such a different setting. The temperature was around 35°C so certainly no frost, bacon was nowhere to be found, and our Monkolé church didn't sing carols. The rest of the year round I was proud to say that they wrote their own Monkolé hymns and didn't use many translated ones, but at Christmas I missed the shepherds watching their flocks near the little town of Bethlehem upon a midnight clear!

In our home we still stuck up a (necessarily artificial) Christmas tree and decorated our living room with tinsel and homemade decorations. Our kids had stockings, and family and our CCB home group were very generous with their Christmas parcels.

I remember one Christmas morning feeling rather forlorn at church. The preacher hadn't even preached on a Christmas passage, and the choir weren't singing particularly Christmassy songs. I felt far from the things which made Christmas for me.

Fortunately, I then began to listen to the words of the song which the choir were singing in Monkolé. They were repeating over and over again, "Í gbe Jesu n̄u akã" which means, "All that's left is Jesus, Him alone", and I took that to be God's message to me. I needed to accept that "feeling Christmassy" was not the objective of the Christmas celebration. Traditions and habits can point us to Jesus, but their familiarity can also lull us into forgetting Who and what we are celebrating.

I was reminded of that lesson last year, when we realised that Christmas was once again going to be very different from anything we were used to. We couldn't get to England, and we couldn't even see the French grandparents because of Covid. We did manage to be with some of the cousins on Christmas Eve, but our church here didn't have a service on Christmas Day, so we livestreamed the CCB one instead!

I'm not even sure I can be completely confident in answering the question of how we will be celebrating Christmas this year. We have booked a Channel Tunnel crossing in the hope that we will get to my mum's for Christmas, but these days it is dangerous to try to predict the future!

However, I do know Who I will be celebrating on Christmas Day, and I know that He will be with us wherever we are and whatever we are doing. Jesus alone is the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, and our Lord.

-Hilary Deneufchâtel

