

The season to be jolly

How many presents can you remember from last year? What you gave? What you received? Fiona Hoban tells us what is more important than gifts.



FOR ME personally, it's the hype that dampens the Christmas spirit. It generates an awful sense of pressure: I ought to be out partying; I ought to be full of festive cheer; I ought to be running around the shops like a headless chicken.

And yet I'm not Scrooge nor am I averse to Christmas. There's plenty to enjoy when you think about it. It's perfect timing that in the depths of our winter we break the darkness with bright lights. Christmas carols always warm my heart (while the odd hot port warms the rest of me!). A bit of time off work, a chance to catch up with friends and family, permission to indulge in chocolate and festive re-runs on the TV. What's not to like?

Well, sometimes, it's family! Christmas invariably generates tales of woe involving (difficult) in-laws, Uncle Jack (fond of the odd drink) or Aunt Mary (doesn't like Uncle Jack). There are always politics involved with whose turn it is to visit whom for Christmas Day. It's no wonder some of us want to take to the bed!

Then there's relentless commercialisation to contend with. The shopping frenzy that takes hold of otherwise sane people baffles me. The question is asked: "Well, are you all set for the Christmas?" as if I'm in training for some high-performance marathon!

Behind the tinsel, lights, food and social festivities lies the feast that marks the birth of Jesus. For

Christians, it's a time to celebrate this birth and we are reminded of his humble, simple birthplace – a stable. A far cry from the hype.

Things are more humble for many of us this year due to the economic downturn. This brings its own pressures, but also relief in its own way. Less really can mean more. I remember last year a number of my friends agreed that we would not exchange Christmas presents. Some of us were more strapped for cash than others, but we all breathed the same sigh of relief. It was one less thing to worry about – and it didn't make a blind bit of difference to the level of Christmas cheer that we shared.

How many presents can you remember from last year? What you gave? What you received? The most important thing is the chat and the craic – time to catch up.

Of course, Christmas is often tinged with sadness and loneliness as we remember loved ones who have passed or as we take stock of another year. This year many of us will be missing those who have emigrated. And these days it's often further afield than Britain as loved ones have had to venture to Australia and Canada in search of work and a new chance. It's difficult for those who can't make it home to their family.

For these reasons, we should remember that all of us have to face loss, sadness and loneliness during our lives. This should be embraced as a

Keys points to remember this Christmas

TAKING STOCK OF 2011

- One goal I'll continue to work on next year is ...
- Something I'm handling better this year than last year is ...
- Looking back on 2011, I'm grateful for ...
- One good thing about 2011 was ...
- One thing that gives me particular pleasure is ...
- Others can depend on me to ...
- I am glad that I am able to ...
- Those who know me know that I can ...
- One thing I need to bear in mind heading into 2012 is ...
- One thing I'm looking forward to in 2012 is ...

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE OVER CHRISTMAS

List the traits this person has that you dislike, eg, critical, lazy, pious, etc. Now list the type of traits you wish they had more of, eg, good natured, more relaxed, more kind, etc. You then take on these traits and practise them in their company.

One of two things will happen: they will either get in on this vibe and you may be pleasantly surprised by how they change; or if they don't and continue to be their usual self, their behaviour will not affect you in the same way.

How could it?

real part of Christmas – just as much as the joyful festivities. Christmas doesn't have to be either/or – either you're full of festive cheer or you're feeling sad and lonely. It's usually a bit of both. So if, for whatever reason, Christmas is tough for you – so be it. Let it be. It must also have been tough for Jesus in that stable more than 2,000 years ago. By acknowledging this, you will open up space to let a little bit of Christmas light in.

Speaking of light, by Christmas Day the shortest day in the year will already have passed, so days start to get a bit longer. This is, in itself, a cause for celebration. ✨