

Do They Know It's Christmas?

Good morning folks,

As we gather together this morning it's easy to feel the excitement of the upcoming holiday season. The lights twinkle, the air is filled with festive cheer, and the anticipation of time spent with loved ones is palpable. Now, as well you know, Christmas is part of the Christian calendar and celebrates the birth of Jesus. I, however, am an atheist, which means I do not believe in any god. And so every year I find myself thinking quite carefully about what Christmas means to me, and why I celebrate this season. Music is a huge part of Christmas, whether through hymns, carols or the annual race to be number 1 in the charts on Christmas Day, so in this assembly I shall attempt to define what a non-religious Christmas means through three of my favourite Christmas songs.

Christmas is about our loved ones. My Mum, Dad, Brother, Sister, Sister in Law and niece all live in Cornwall. It is a long drive and we all live busy lives so I do not see them nearly as often as I'd like. I miss them very much. Christmas means my eldest son will come home to visit, and

we will all go down to Cornwall to see my family. It is a time filled with love, joy and laughter.

At this time every year I always listen to the song White Wine in the Sun by Tim Minchin, because he perfectly expresses the importance of family at Christmas time. I'll be seeing my Dad, Tim sings, my brother and sister, my gran and my Mum, they'll be drinking white wine in the sun. "In the sun" because they are Australian. The song begins with Minchin looking forward to Christmas and seeing his family. It ends with a beautiful message to his baby daughter that her family will always be there for her, no matter how far away she travels. I am going to try and quote this last verse for you, but I warn you, it is a passage that normally ends with me ugly crying, sentimental fool that I am.

And you, my baby girl

My jetlagged infant daughter

You'll be handed 'round the room like a puppy at a primary school

And you won't understand, but you will learn someday

That wherever you are and whatever you face

These are the people who'll make you feel safe in this world

My sweet blue-eyed girl

And if, my baby girl, when you're twenty-one or thirty-one

And Christmas comes around

And you find yourself nine thousand miles from home

You'll know what ever comes

Your brothers and sisters and me and your mum

Will be waiting for you in the sun

Christmas is about our loved ones. I commend the song White Wine in the Sun to you.

Christmas is about hope and dreams. This sentiment is beautifully captured in the timeless song “Fairytale of New York” by The Pogues.

I suspect you will have heard “Fairytale of New York,” it is difficult to escape the song at this time of year! And so you’ll know it’s not a typical Christmas carol. It’s a raw, honest story set amidst the hustle and bustle of New York City, with its ups and downs, its dreams and disappointments. And yet, despite the tragedy, it tells us about two of the most profound aspects of Christmas—the power of hope and the magic of dreams.

This song begins in a place of dejection, with a man reflecting on his life from the confines of a police holding cell, the drunk tank, where people who are drunk and disorderly may be held over night until they sober up. It's Christmas Eve, and as he listens to an old man singing in the next cell, he recalls his dreams of a brighter future. It begins:

It was Christmas Eve babe

In the drunk tank

An old man said to me, won't see another one

And then he sang a song

The Rare Old Mountain Dew

I turned my face away

And dreamed about you

Life is not a Disney film, no-one lives “happily ever after”. There will be times in all our lives when we find ourselves struggling through doubt and despair, and yearning for better. This is when our resilience and our hope will serve us well. Hope, a flicker of light in the darkness, a belief that tomorrow holds promise.

Christmas embodies this hope. It reminds us no matter how challenging our circumstances may be, there's always a chance for renewal and redemption. Just think of the story of Christmas itself, with a child born in a humble manger, yet destined to change the world. It's a story, whether one is believer or not, that transcends time, inspiring us to believe in miracles and the extraordinary potential within each of us. As the song progresses, we meet the man's partner, and together, they reminisce about their dreams in the city that never sleeps.

Kirsty McCall sings: When you first took my hand, on that cold

Christmas Eve, you promised me Broadway was waiting for me.

New York, with its skyscrapers and bustling streets and its promise of fame and fortune, symbolizes the dreams we all chase. New York at Christmas is a time and a place where anything seems possible, when our dreams feel within reach.

As the song progresses our protagonists' relationship becomes strained by life's trials. This is the human experience. Sometimes, our dreams are challenged, and the path forward seems unclear. It is at times like these our dreams are most important. It is by holding onto our dreams

we can keep hope alive and not give up. Even at their lowest point the couple in the song remember their dreams:

I could have been someone (sings Shane McGowan)

Well so could anyone (replies Kirsty McCall)

You took my dreams from me

When I first found you

I kept them with me babe

I put them with my own

Can't make it all alone

I've built my dreams around you

This is the message of Christmas. It's about standing by each other, sharing our dreams, and kindling hope in ourselves and those around us. It's about believing in the possibility of a brighter tomorrow and working together to make those dreams a reality.

As we listen to "Fairytale of New York" and gather this holiday season, let's carry this spirit with us. Let's celebrate not only what we have but also what we aspire to achieve. Let's reach out to those who may feel isolated or in need of encouragement, offering our support and

understanding. After all, as the song tells us, “the boys of the NYPD choir still singing ‘Galway Bay’” —a symbol of resilience and enduring hope.

Christmas is about our hopes and dreams. I commend the song Fairytale of New York to you.

Christmas is a time for giving. Obviously there are the gifts. I love shopping for presents for family and friends. It is a time dedicated to thinking about just them and what sort of gift might entertain or amuse them.

But I think Christmas is also a time for giving in a broader sense. It can be easy to get caught up in the whirlwind of shopping, parties, and decorations. While these activities bring joy and excitement, they can also distract us from the true spirit of the season. The essence of Christmas lies not just in the gifts we exchange, but in the love and compassion we share. It’s a time to reflect on our blessings and to consider how we can extend those blessings to others. A time to remember those less fortunate than ourselves and do something to help.

It is a time when the somewhat complicated song Do They Know It's Christmas once again raises its head. The song will likely receive even more attention this year as it is the 40th anniversary of this charity single.

The lyrics of "Do They Know It's Christmas?" remind us of those who might not experience the same abundance during the holidays. They encourage us to look beyond our immediate surroundings and extend our compassion globally. This call to action resonates with the spirit of giving, urging us to contribute to the welfare of others, particularly those in dire need. The song has done good in the world. It has raised in the region of £150 million which has gone towards alleviating poverty in a number of countries in the continent of Africa. And there can be no doubting Bob Geldof's genuine passion and rage at the injustice of the terrible famine that struck Ethiopia in the 1980s while those of us in the West, ignorant of the plight of Ethiopians, enjoyed Christmas. A season often synonymous with excess and over-indulgence.

However, it's also important to address some criticisms of the song, as they offer valuable lessons in how we approach charitable giving. Critics

have pointed out the lyrics, though well-meaning, are patronising and oversimplified. For example, lines like "There won't be snow in Africa this Christmas time" suggest Africa is a single nation, rather than a diverse continent, and overlooks the rich cultures and traditions that exist there. This serves as a reminder that when we give, we must do so with awareness and respect for those we aim to help.

Such criticism of Do They Know It's Christmas underscores the idea that charity should not just be about giving material gifts or money. True giving involves understanding and empathy—taking the time to learn about the needs and circumstances of others. It invites us to build bridges and connections, to listen, and to act in ways that honor the dignity of those we support. As we listen to this song, let's challenge ourselves to think deeply about how we can make a difference in ways that are considerate and impactful.

In the spirit of Christmas, I urge you to embrace the opportunity to be part of a global community that cares and acts responsibly. Whether through volunteering time, donating resources, or simply spreading kindness in our everyday interactions, each small action contributes to

a larger wave of positive change. Kindness is a super power. Let's remember that the essence of giving is not just in the act itself but in the love and understanding that accompany it, whether giving to loved ones, or to charity.

At the start I mentioned I am an atheist, and as such, spend time every year reflecting on what a non-religious Christmas is about. With the help of *White Wine in the Sun*, *Fairytale of New York* and *Do They Know it's Christmas*, I have reached the conclusion Christmas is about love, joy, hope and giving. And, of course, this is pretty much exactly what Christians would also say Christmas is about. In the build up to this Christmas break I urge you to make sure you make the most of the time you spend with your loved ones, nurture your hopes and dreams for the future, and do not forget those less fortunate than you.

Thank you for listening.