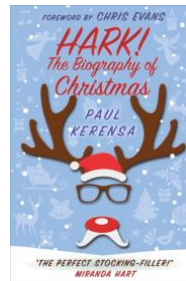


Book/Small Group notes on *Hark! The Biography of Christmas* by Paul Kerensa



READING NOTES FOR BOOK GROUPS or CHURCH SMALL GROUPS

Hi, Paul here. Now I don't want to be one of those people who talks about Christmas too early, but...

I've heard that a few folks have used my festive history book for their book groups, or church small groups. That's very nice.

If you've not heard of the book, it's a festive fact-filled sleigh-ride through the customs and cultural contributions of Christmas over the years. It's got a serious side: looking at the ongoing spiritual vs commercial rivalry (ie. 'Jesus vs Santa'), the Church's love-hate relationship to the festival, and pondering how we celebrate it today. We consider how we reached the current Christmas, via twelve dates when past Christmases became a bit more like today's celebration, through St Nick, Dickens, Bing Crosby and all.

The best time to read this seasonal book is obviously late in the year. I can see it makes for a nice discussion about the history of that most festive of festivals. Yet what's been lacking is some kind of study guide, if you had a group that wanted such a thing.

So I've put together two versions of such a guide:

- The first is a short collection of jumping-off questions, suitable for a one-off **book group**. If you're having one meet-up with co-reading chums, there are a few discussion points. Pour some mulled wine, pass around the mince pies, and mull on these mental morsels.
- The second is a longer (still bite-sized) set of ponderings, suitable for a **church small group**. Most meet every week or fortnight, so I've arranged it across **five gold sessions...** (ie. maybe start in early November). Depending on your session regularity, you can squidge the timings, start earlier or later, or overrun into the next session's questions. It's very tweakable. I'm suggesting approx. 2-3 chapters per session.

I've also included Bible readings and prayer points for these sessions, similar to the structure I wrote in my small group course book *A Beautiful Friendship: A Lent Course based on Casablanca* (DLT, 2014). I recommend that for Lent – but then again, I would.

Choose which of the two styles is best for your group. Make sure everyone's got a copy of *Hark! The Biography of Christmas*. Order via your local bookshop, a fine independent bookseller, buy from me at one of my gigs, or at online retailers such as:

<https://www.waterstones.com/book/hark/paul-kerensa/9780745980171>

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Hark-Biography-Christmas-Paul-Kerensa/dp/0745980171>

<https://www.amazon.com/Hark-Biography-Christmas-Paul-Kerensa/dp/0745980171/>

<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/hark-paul-kerensa/1127148025>

<https://www.eden.co.uk/shop/hark-4531821.html>

<https://www.bookdepository.com/Hark-Paul-Kerensa/9780745980171>

<https://www.koorong.com/search/product/hark-the-biography-of-christmas-paul-kerensa/9780745980171.jhtml>

If you'd like a personalised video greeting from me to introduce your session, I'll gladly record you one. Just tell me where you're based, when you're meeting (so I know when to send it by), and what sort of session(s) you're planning. Email paul@paulkerensa.com, subject title 'Book Group Video', and I'll send one over. (+ Thanks to writer Sheridan Voysey for this idea! His books are great too.)

ONE-OFF BOOK GROUP MEET-UP QUESTIONS

Serving suggestion:

Mulled wine

Mince pies

Stollen

Ambient Christmas music

Christmas sweaters optional



When all are well-met, discuss as many or as few as you like...

- ICE-BREAKER: Can everyone name three must-have customs/traditions that make their Christmas? “Christmas isn’t Christmas without...”?
- Do you think your Christmas is more commercial or spiritual?
- Onto the book: What festive facts surprised you?
- How does Christmas as a celebration differ from Norse Yule, or Roman Saturnalia?
- Have we added to the Nativity story over the years? Which Nativity characters are indispensable to you? Is it the same story without an innkeeper or a donkey?
- The Christmas dinner table has put on a lot of pounds over the years. How and why do you think it’s changed over the centuries – and do we blame it on the royals?
- At the back of the book, on p.276, there’s a timeline of key Christmas moments. Which moments do you think changed Christmas most significantly?
- Let’s talk about St Nicholas (little ones to bed!). What does he have in common with the modern Santa? What positive traits does St Nicholas represent?
- The Church had a love-hate relationship with Christmas. Why do you think this was?
- When the Puritans banned Christmas... did they have a point?
- What’s your favourite Christmas carol? Is it because of the music, the lyrics, or something else? Is there anything you’ve learned about the story behind it? (pp.153, 157 have more on some stories behind specific carols)
- Christmas trees have pagan origins but there’ve been attempts to ‘Christianify’ it over the years. Why still so popular? What’s on yours? If we harked back to historical decorations, what would you put up? (Gingerbread? Infant Jesus? Real candles?)
- “Merry Christmas”, “Happy Christmas” or “Season’s Greetings”?
- In World War I, why did Christmas and its truce become such a focus? What was the legacy of Christmas and war?
- Pick a favourite 20th century Christmas song. Why has it endured?
- Pick a favourite Christmas film or TV moment. Should this be handed down from generation to generation, or does it belong in the past? If you could plan next year’s big Christmas TV/cinema smash hit, what would it be?

...You could round off by watching a Christmas classic – or even just the trailer! *The Muppet Christmas Carol* or *It’s a Wonderful Life* – go on, treat yourself.

...OR Find the Christmas quiz at the back of the book on p.282. Good luck...

...+ Merry Christmas!

Book/Small Group notes on *Hark! The Biography of Christmas* by Paul Kerensa



A FIVE-SESSION SMALL GROUP STUDY

Based on *Hark! The Biography of Christmas* by Paul Kerensa

The following five sessions are intended for small groups of a church or other Christian meet-up. They can work equally well on your own or with a few friends. These sessions will pick out a Christian response to the book – and to Christmas as a whole. How should Christians today think of Christmas, given the long and winding journey it's been on?

SESSION 1: Yule + Nativity (prologue-chapter 1)

Serving suggestion:

Mince pies

Ambient Christmas music on volume setting 2

No further Christmas decoration – it's early yet

Opening icebreaker (each week, encourage everyone to answer early on!)

Can everyone name three must-have customs/traditions that make their Christmas. "Christmas isn't Christmas without...?"

Questions (each week, feel free to skip any for time)

- What did old Norse Yule have in common with today's Christmas? What's missing?
- As farming (and food-sharing festivals, like Yule) came to Northern Europe, at the same time the Israelites were wandering the wilderness. Read **Exodus 16:2-5, 11-15**.
- From Sinai to Scandinavia, wilderness to winter, what's God's relationship between nature and humanity? Do we only ask for God's help when nature's larder is bare?
- In the Nine Lessons and Carols service, the first lesson has us forage from the land due to our broken nature (Genesis 3:17-19). The second is God's covenant and promise to us (Genesis 22:15-18). Can you summarise the 'big story' of the Bible?
- Read the third lesson, **Isaiah 9:2, 6-7**, a glimpse of things to come. Is the Isaiah passage like peeking into your Christmas presents before you open them?
- *Hark!* pp.30-32, beginning "On our first date of Christmas", contains a description of Mary's experience, based on what the Bible tells us and our knowledge of the time. Is there anything here that surprises you?
- Read **Luke 2:1-20**. What elements are different between Luke's account and a traditional school Nativity? Are all the familiar characters here? Who is essential?
- How do the gospels differ in how they present Jesus' birth?
- The gospel-writers go into much greater length about Jesus' final earthly week than his first. Why has the world made Christmas a bigger festival than Easter?

A closing prayer

God our Father, Thank you for providing for us, in the winter of our lives. Thank you for the ultimate Christmas present, in the manger, in your Son. Help us to remove the wrapping paper that we've put in the way, to see your loving gift at the heart of the celebration. Help us see past the commerce and feasting, to experience Christmas anew.

Amen

SESSION 2: Rome + St Nicholas (chapters 2-3)

Serving suggestion:

Gingerbread biscuits

Instrumental Christmas music on volume setting 3

One small piece of tinsel is permitted at this early stage...

Opening icebreaker

What's your most memorable Christmas present?

Questions

- What was the state of the world Jesus was born into? Read **Matthew 2:1-8** and discuss what you think it looked like and felt like politically. Does it remind you of anywhere in the world today?
- Born into Roman culture, Jesus lived during around 33 Saturnalia festivals. *Hark!* pp.52-54 gives some details of these festivals. What parts of this late-December ritual do you recognise in Christmas today?
- Read **Matthew 22:17-21**. What does this tell us about Jesus' relationship to the Roman world?
- Let's talk about St Nicholas (litt'uns out of earshot!). What does he have in common with the modern Santa? What positive traits does St Nicholas represent? (*Hark!* p.68 has the story of his stocking-filling generosity).
- St Nicholas was a bishop, then a saint, then a legend (as sailors told of his generosity), then a myth (as tales merged with Norse mythology), then a children's character (in poems in the 1800s), then the modern face of Christmas (thanks to advertising). What do you think St Nicholas would have thought of his changing roles? Would he be happy with this bizarre CV?
- St Nicholas had a key role at 325's Council of Nicaea, even standing up for Christ's equality with God (see *Hark!* p.67). That Council formed the Nicene Creed, the statement of Christian faith. What legacy do you think St Nicholas would like to have left? The face of Christmas? Formaliser of the faith? An example of generosity?
- Roman winter festivals encouraged gift-giving, from Saturnalia pottery to New Year cakes and greenery. St Nicholas promoted generosity. What is Jesus' attitude to gift-giving? (See **Luke 11:13, Matthew 6:19-21, Acts 20:35, 1 John 3:16-18**).
- The modern Christmas is often painted as 'Santa vs Jesus'. Does St Nicholas suggest a way that it can be both?
- How can our own gift-giving change for the better?

A closing prayer

Loving Father, Thank you for sending Jesus when you did, into that place and time in history. Thank you that His message was received, that the church grew, that the obstacles in the way of the early church were overcome. Help us to keep our Christmas from becoming like the festivals of Roman days. We are sorry for when we put commerce before Christ. Help us to give freely, knowing that all gifts come from you.

Amen

SESSION 3: Dinner, Carols + Puritans (chapters 4-6)

Serving suggestion:

*Spiced apple or hot chocolate drinks + 'pigs in blankets' for the ambitious
Old carols: 'Coventry Carol', 'In dulce júbilo', 'God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen' (even the earliest carol, 'Jesus refulsit omnium', if you can find it online)
A sprig of holly. You don't have to. Would be nice though.*

Opening icebreaker

One by one, suggest a food item you've had at Christmas dinner. Keep going until you've clearly strayed far from traditional Christmas dinner...

Questions

- A thousand years after Jesus' birth, Christmas became twelve days of celebration. Was this a good thing? It made more 'holy-days' (or holidays) for celebrating, but did the celebrating get out of control? Does it still?
- What does the Bible say about celebrating? Read **Ecclesiastes 8:15, John 2:7-10, Colossians 2:16-17, 1 Corinthians 10:31** and add any of your own.
- In days gone by, Advent was a time of fasting. Do you think the modern Christmas could do with a fast before the feast? Do you do anything different for Advent?
- Read the last two paragraphs of *Hark!* p.98 – the description of a royal Christmas banquet, and its critique by Matthew of Paris. Do we blame the royals for Christmas excess? Should we rein in our own Christmas feasts too?
- Around the same time, St Francis of Assisi introduced a far quieter Christmas custom. Read *Hark!* pp.119-120: "On our fifth date of Christmas". Have you ever experienced an immersive biblical retelling? How did it feel?
- Many royals arranged for the poor to be fed Christmas dinners, long before charities helped with this in the 1800s. How can we help the hungry at Christmas?
- Why did the Puritans ban Christmas? Did they have a point at the time?
- What modern Christmas item or custom would you ban if you could?
- Onto carols: What's your favourite Christmas carol and why? Is it because of the music, the lyrics, or something else? What do you know of how the carol came about? (pp.153, 157 have stories behind a few carols)
- Britain had only one legal carol in the 18th century, because it was the only one thought to be biblically accurate. Read **Luke 2:8-14** and work out which carol it was!
- <https://kneeldownstandup.wordpress.com/2017/12/05/hark-the-soundtrack/> has other Christmas songs you could play – including 'Jesus refulsit omnium' (the first carol we know of) and 'The Coventry Carol' (telling the Massacre of the Innocents).

A closing prayer

God our King. Help us look past earthly rulers to see the Servant King at the heart of Christmas. Forgive us when we over-indulge, but help us celebrate the gift of Jesus, amid the Christmas trimmings we've added over the years. Help us reach out to those who need help this Christmas, and through the year.

Amen

SESSION 4: Dickens + Victoria (chapters 7-9)

Serving suggestion:

Mulled wine and German Stollen biscuits or gingerbread

19th century carols: Once in Royal David's City, O Come All Ye Faithful, Silent Night

Something Dickensian

Opening icebreaker

What makes your Christmas tree unique? Any particular decorations? What's on top?

Questions

- Read *Hark!* p.187, final paragraph ("Charity had been..."). Royals have often influenced festive culture. How do you think Queen Victoria influenced Christmas?
- Charles Dickens was a Christian who adored the Bible, if not the church. Read **Matthew 5:3-5**. How could this verse have inspired *A Christmas Carol*?
- When Dickens was buried, he was called 'the parabler of his age'. How did Dickens – and Jesus – both use storytelling to bring a moral vision to their crowds?
- Read **Luke 16:19-31**. Dickens adapted this as a children's story just three years after *A Christmas Carol*. What crossovers do you see between this and *A Christmas Carol*? (Consider the rich man as Scrooge; Lazarus as Tiny Tim; v.30 and Marley's ghost).
- From Christmas cards to trees to crackers, the 1840s perhaps added more to the modern Christmas than any other decade. Was this good or bad for the 'Christian' Christmas? (On one hand it refocused Christmas to family and charity instead of drunken gluttony, but on the other hand it didn't particularly focus on Christ.)
- Martin Luther was perhaps one of the first to put lights on a tree, reminding him of the Bethlehem sky. Why have Christmas trees lasted so long? (They may have pagan roots, but eternal evergreens triumphing over natural death is an enduring image.)
- Read **Jeremiah 10:2-4**. Still want to put that tree up?! (Don't worry: that verse might refer more to pagan idolatry.) Either way, a God-focused Christmas is clearly the aim.
- Meanwhile in the US, vestryman Washington Irving revived St Nicholas tales for children, then church-planter Clement Clarke Moore wrote 'A Visit from St Nicholas' (see *Hark!* p.169). Did these Christian creatives change Christmas for the better?
- The first Christmas cards weren't religious – and the very first included a child drinking wine! Are Christian Christmas cards easy to find? Should we aim to send these? Some nowadays do a charitable donation instead – are cards on the way out?
- Later in Victoria's reign, Bishop Benson created the Nine Lessons and Carols service. Read **Matthew 2:9-12**, the last part of the eighth lesson from the service. Reflect on all the gold trimmings and Christmas decoration being presented for the infant Jesus.

For this session's closing prayer...

Imagine a Christmas list, but of prayer requests, for you and those close to you. What's on your list? As the days grow busier, what could you do with focusing on more? What do you need to ask God for, as you approach Christmas? What do you need to thank God for?

SESSION 5: Songs + films (chapters 10-12)

Serving suggestion:

Eggnog and Christmas cake

Any 1940s Christmas music, eg. Judy Garland, Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole

Christmas jumpers

Opening icebreaker

Best Christmas film. Go!

Questions

- In World War I, why did Christmas and its truce become such a focus? Which Christian song unified three nations in the trenches?
- Does Christmas peace mean anything in modern warfare today?
- After the war, the Nine Lessons and Carols service was revived by King's College Cambridge. Read **John 1:1-8**, part of the final lesson. How can we be a witness, testifying about the light, as in verse 7?
- Christmas Eve 1906 saw the first ever radio entertainment programme, an amateur broadcast ending with 'O Holy Night' and **Luke 2:14**. Read the words of one or both. Where can we find such broadcasts on radio/TV this Christmas?
- Early broadcasters such as Reverend John Mayo (see *Hark!* pp.233-234) saw radio as a great leveller, uniting all of society to be informed, educated and entertained. This included the popular play 'Bethlehem' (*Hark!* p.237). What TV or radio programmes have informed or educated you, especially re a Christian worldview?
- Read the poem at the bottom of *Hark!* p.241. In our darkest times, how is Jesus seen as the light of the world? (See **John 1:5, 8:12**)
- The world's number one bestselling song debuted just days after Pearl Harbor (see *Hark!* p.250). Why did 'White Christmas' resonate so strongly at the time?
- Pick a favourite 20th century Christmas song (some are on *Hark!* pp.263-265). Why has it endured?
- Pick a favourite Christmas film or TV moment. Should this be handed down through the generations, or does it belong in the past? Does the way we watch TV mean we won't watch together any more? Enjoy a clip or two on Youtube perhaps!
- Where next for Christmas? How would you change next year's Christmas for the better? Is it too late to change it for this Christmas?
- If you have time, there's a Christmas quiz on *Hark!* p.282.
- End with the final verses from the last of the Nine Lessons and Carols: **John 1:9-14**.

A closing prayer

Jesus, Light of the World. Illuminate our world. Let us live by your example. Help us reach, as you did, the poor, the meek, the persecuted. May the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the perseverance of the wise men, the obedience of the holy family, and the peace of Christ be with us all, this Christmas, and through our lives.

Amen

...+ Merry Christmas!