

**2<sup>nd</sup> December 2018**

**Christmas, not Xmas**

The meme I posted last week attracted quite a few comments. Perhaps this one might do the same.

The dictum that church and politics should never mix is never further from the truth than when we get serious about the real Christmas, as opposed to the *Xmas* that much of our surrounding culture is caught up in. There is something sterile and irrelevant about most people's crib scenes, where they do exist. In most homes, the story of Jesus born in an animal shelter and his family fleeing the genocide wrought by the political ruler of his time are replaced by tinsel and flashing lights and lavish feasts and parties.

We live in the age of the #MeToo. We are increasingly aware of how much domestic violence and domestic murder there is in our community. We cannot be unaware of the plight of people fleeing violence and oppression remaining consigned to a stateless existence in an impoverished community. Perhaps we might be more attuned this Christmas to believing what a woman says about her sex life. Perhaps we might be more inclined this Christmas season to advocate on behalf of asylum seekers. Perhaps we might be even more inclined this Christmas to support the Winter Night Shelter project that will provide a roof over the heads of Sunbury's homeless next winter. Perhaps this Christmas we might make the effort to call on our political leaders to better provide for the increasing number of poor in our community.

None of this can be achieved through the medium of this world's brand of power. Jesus taught us to live close to the poor, to the marginalised, to those seeking shelter and a place to belong.

Christmas reminds us that God believes us when we speak of our reality. Christmas reminds us that we have a place to belong in the community of Christ. Christmas is a time for us to share our commonwealth with one another as we have need, blessing those who have less, and being blessed by those who have more. Christmas reminds us that God knows who we are, and loves us.

Christmas is a time when Christians can live a different Christmas than our neighbours and shine a light in the dark corners of our world.

Christmas is about believing what a woman said about her sex life.

Christmas is about a family finding safety as asylum seekers.

Christmas is about a child in need receiving support from the wealthy.

Christmas is about God identifying with the marginalized, not the powerful.

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**9<sup>th</sup> December 2018**

**A special kind of peace**

This second week of Advent focuses us on peace. Yeah ... right ... peace you say ... but it's the Christmas season. There is no peace in the Christmas season. Peace will come when we've survived Christmas.

Maybe we need to get our Christmas shaken up a bit – to shake us out of our 'bubble of niceness' as someone described it – and make us aware of the state of our world. Peace?

I think of people who have just lost a loved one, of families riven by violence, of people who are financially crushed by the expectations of Christmas, to say nothing of war-ravaged places like Syria or fire-ravaged parts of Queensland and Canada. I don't want to write fluffy words about peace while many are experiencing the opposite.

Of course Jesus entered a society that had been to hell and back several times over. They knew what it was to be captive, oppressed ... brutalised. They were waiting for a saviour who would bring peace. Can we blame them for seeking circumstantial peace? We do it all the time. "If only my circumstances changed... if my bank account was full ... if I got the right job ... if I hadn't suffered this or that, then I would have..." peace? Really?

I recently read some words of Katie Kobler: "*Peace is found in my soul, not by my eyes...*" The Psalmist said: "*Be still and know that I am God...*" True peace is something internal, not external. We can know the peace of Christ in the midst of the most devastating circumstances.

The peace Christ came to give us is a special kind of peace. Christ's peace transcends whatever our circumstances might be. I pray that in this Christmas season we might all know a greater stillness in our hearts, and a greater knowing in our souls ... for that is the great gift from God Jesus came to give us.

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**16<sup>th</sup> December 2018**

### **The Christmas story and our ever-changing lives**

Several weeks ago Sue and I participated in a cooking school that taught us how to bone chickens. Having had experience of boning various cuts of pork as part of my product development role when I worked in the meat industry I realised I really didn't have much of a clue as to how to go about cutting up and/or boning a chicken. By the end of the night I thought I was pretty clued up on the various techniques. By the end of the night we had cut up a few carcasses, fashioning some into Kievs, some into schnitzels, others just prepared into various cuts. The culmination of the night was to fully bone out an entire carcass and roll it ready to roast.

The problem is that that is now several weeks ago. And when Sue brought home a couple of chickens and suggested I prepare them in accordance with how she wants to use them I have lost my confidence. As I write this column I'm about to pluck up my courage, pick up the lovely boning knife we received as part of the school, and see what I do remember. I suspect I might find that I don't do it exactly as I was taught.

I share this experience because it occurs to me that it is much the same with the Christmas story. We have heard it many times. We perhaps think we know it inside out. But it is a whole year since we encountered the wonderful mysteries that lie at its core. And there is a sense that this story – as is the case with all scripture – reads us as much as we read it. And I wonder how that story will read in my life a year later than the last time I sat with the awesome story of God entering my reality and brought light and peace and saving grace to it.

My reality this Christmas is different than it was last Christmas. Various things – things that have proven challenging me, saddened me, excited me, and inspired me – have transpired over the course of the year that has elapsed. I still don't understand why St. Mary's would withdraw from the 5pm community. I have learned much about the inner workings of our church in the role I have exercised in the Synod. I don't understand how Australia cannot have a strategy for redressing the dire consequences of unmitigated climate change. I am conscious of the growing incidence of homelessness. I worry about our world. The reality into which I will contemplate the coming of God in the Christ-Child this Christmas needs to be open to that story engaging me with new learning and new commitment to the work of God's kingdom on earth. Otherwise I might just as well not bother having Christmas.

Your reality will be different this Christmas too. I wonder how this story that is ever new might engage that changed combination of life experience. I encourage us all to attune our lives with this awesome story of hope and love, and that it might bring joy to your heart in a new way.

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**23<sup>rd</sup> December 2018**

### **Christmas blessings**

Christmas is a time when many will attend a church for one of the few times for the year. I once had a colleague who bemoaned the C&E Christians – who we only see in church at Christmas & Easter. It sounded like he wished they didn't come at all. I couldn't understand that attitude. It seems to me that there is something real that brings people along, something tangible that likely they don't even understand that brings them along. And our job as a church is to help them understand the deep mystery and wonder that gives rise to this need. Our task is to invite them to explore this connection and to give them every reason to join us more often.

An article was shared with me this week about the important role the church continues to play in our modern Australian community. It talked about how some mega-churches are livestreaming their services with glitzy bands and lots of electronic razzle-dazzle. But it was particularly some comments from the last paragraph that took my attention. They sum up why I think attending a church continues to be important in our modern world.

*In an increasingly individualistic and lonely culture, physically gathering in community is countercultural. It often requires sacrifice of our desired schedules and interacting with people whom we might not like that much. It's hard and messy, but it's holy ... being with one another is precious. The church is the people gathered collectively*

*in our bodies. We encounter God-in-Christ together and through one another. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, not in pixels and soundbites.*

I look forward to our gatherings over the Christmas season as we celebrate the Word who became one of us in human flesh and blood. And I look forward to us being together, and hopefully with many others besides, as we share the precious gift of human interaction as a community. If you can't join with our services over Christmas I encourage you to prioritise attending worship wherever you are with a group of other Christians.

I wish you all a blessed and awesome Christmas.

