

2014 MESSAGES FROM AUSTRALIAN CHURCH LEADERS

Australian Baptist Ministries

Do we really need Christmas?

How many times have you asked this question over the last few weeks?

Do we really need all the tension and stress created by the activities associated with this time of the year? The Victorian Department of Health has an online aid, titled "Christmas Tips to Reduce Stress."

The retail sector certainly needs Christmas according to the Federal Treasurer. "Don't let Santa down, go out there and spend for Christmas," Mr Hockey told ABC radio. Christmas sales are estimated to be worth \$40billion.

Do we really need Christmas? Yes because it gives us the opportunity to refocus on several significant features of contemporary life.

The Christmas story as it unfolds in the Bible is associated with family reunion. Jesus birth is local family event. The shepherds on the Bethlehem hills discovered the newborn baby in the simplest of family scenes. Christmas is an opportunity to reaffirm the importance of family; an opportunity to commit to working to strengthen families and not weaken them. Let's especially remember families in difficult circumstances, in refugee facilities, isolated indigenous communities, drought affected rural areas and sole-parent families.

Secondly, Christmas reaffirms the value of giving over and against getting. The Bible narratives of the first Christmas record that the wise men came bearing gifts for this newborn baby, who would change the course of human history. Everyone needs to feel someone is really interested in him or her and gifts give tangible expression to this basic need. Sadly the possibility that as a nation we are going to further reduce our gifts to the less well-off in our world by further reducing Foreign Aid is a disappointing commentary our national gift giving ethos.

Christmas ultimately provides the opportunity to focus on the bigger picture of history. To be reminded again that our personal spirituality yearns for hope that transforms. Christmas marks the intervention of the eternal creator God into the personal history of every one of us. Eugene Peterson in the Message Bible puts it simply: "And this sublime Word became flesh and blood and moved into our neighbourhood." God with us and for us.

Yes we really do need Christmas!

Pastor Keith Jobberns

National Ministries Director, Australian Baptist Ministries

Congregational Federation of Australia and New Zealand

In August 1914 the world was plunged into the bitter First World War which in the next four years would take 11 million lives.

And yet, exactly a hundred years ago, on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day 1914, roughly 100,000 British and German soldiers ventured into "no man's land", where they mingled,

exchanging food, souvenirs, presents of cigarettes and plum puddings and sang carols and songs. They even played games of football with one another.

People who had been fighting and killing each other for five months met in peace for a few short hours at Christmas. They weren't ordered to do so – in fact they were ordered not to. Yet despite everything that pulled them apart, they were able to put aside all that had happened and spend time together to celebrate Christmas.

There is a lesson to us today. Can we put aside our own battles during the season of peace and goodwill? The big battles and the small ones. The harsh words with our families or disputes with our neighbours. The grudges and prejudices, the hurts that remain long after the cause has been forgotten.

The endless cycle of violence is one of desolation. Having the courage to break the cycle brings hope for peace and all that goes with it – not just a cessation of war but safety, wellbeing and wholeness – for ourselves, our community and our nation.

Drop the baggage and give the gift of hope this Christmas. Let us reconcile the hurts in our families and the disputes with our neighbours. Let us bring peace.

Dr Joe Goodall

Moderator, Congregational Federation of Australia and New Zealand

Coptic Orthodox Church

We congratulate you all on the Glorious Feast of the Nativity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Commercials, sales, gifts, Christmas trees, season's greetings, holiday parties, fancy foods and decorated homes...all overshadow the reality of a poor boy born in a manger to a virgin mother whose name was Jesus.

Over 2000 years ago, when the Lord Jesus was born, no one realized that Jacob's ladder had finally touched down on earth and the Son of God Himself came down to our world. It amazes me how the world expected the coming of the Messiah for generations, and when He finally did come their searching eyes completely missed Him. "He was in the world and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him." (John 1:10-11).

Have we become a similar breed, not acknowledging Him either? These thoughts led me to wonder how many of us today truly understand why God actually left all the heavenly glory and became man? The Son of God became man in order that the sons of men may become sons of God. Since Adam's fall, God's promise was finally fulfilled that a Saviour would be born from the woman's seed (Eve's) who would finally crush the head of the serpent (Satan).

Christ's nativity was the first step in the fulfilment of that promise. That was a great day for all humanity. Yet earth did not celebrate. Instead, the hosts of heaven rejoiced for and on our behalf.

"Chanting, Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, goodwill towards men." (Luke 2:4)

Our hope and prayer is that this Christmas the peace of Christ fill our homes, society

and world. "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you." (John 14:27).

May the Christ born in Bethlehem bless our country Australia, its Government and its people

May the peace of Christ fill the hearts and lives of all.

Bishop Daniel

Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Sydney & Affiliated Regions

Greek Orthodox Church of Australia

All of Christendom is preparing this year, once again, to celebrate Christmas, within a world that is troubled, frantic and contradictory.

The phenomena of international violence, together with crime of every kind and materialistic hysteria, all apply asphyxiating pressure upon the chests of every honourable person. They threaten to turn into a desert not only society and the family unit, but also the inner world of the human soul.

However, it would be the greatest hypocrisy to believe that we can judge this world as if we were somehow outside it. We are a vital part of this contradictory world and we share in its responsibilities absolutely.

If, after the passage of so many centuries, the Incarnation of God has not made our world more loving, this is not due to the non-Christians, but mainly to the followers of Christ. The most bitter betrayal always comes from within, from among one's own people.

How are we then to chant the angelic Christmas hymn with "unblemished lips"? The wonder expressed by the Hymnographer is therefore very timely for us all, when exclaiming: "What can we offer You, O Christ?"

In order to sing "Glory to God in the highest" and to experience, even to the slightest degree, "peace on earth," we must respect the human person as the image of the invisible God. This is regardless of race, gender, colour, religion or age. God became human for all humankind.

If we do not possess the purity of the angels to offer the hymn of the Manger, we are nevertheless able to return to the simplicity of the shepherds, dwelling in the fields and glorifying God who was Born as an infant for all people.

To Him be the glory and power and veneration unto all ages. Amen!

Archbishop Stylianos

Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia

Indian Orthodox Church

Christmas is the festive season to reflect and celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a special time to join together and rejoice that He came to Earth.

As we are preparing to celebrate yet another Christmas, We are concerned about the persecuted and displaced Christian communities across the Middle East from Egypt to Armenia and also about the ongoing violence against Christians in Nigeria and Pakistan. We are living in a world filled with violence and hatred. Peace is nowhere to be found. In our own lives, we struggle to find peace with ourselves.

The birth of Jesus brought Glory in the heavens and Peace on the earth. Jesus came to restore our broken relationship with God so that we could first experience wholeness and peace with ourselves, and then extend it to others around us.

This Christmas season, let us join hands to bring Peace and happiness to others around us, in our communities, cities, and the world we live in. We pray for our brothers in the Middle East, Nigeria and Pakistan. May God Almighty fill their lives with his divine peace, love and grace.

We also pray for the children in immigration detention. We ask the Government to release all children and their families from immigration detention.

Wishing everyone a blessed, peaceful Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

Bishop Dr. Yuhanon Mar Diascoros

Metropolitan for parishes in Australia

Serbian Orthodox Church

GOD'S PEACE — CHRIST IS BORN!

In this past year of our salvation, we solemnly celebrated the centenary of the Great War whose outcome foresaw the end of all wars even to our present day.

Unfortunately, we are still witnessing great unrest in the Middle East, Egypt, Ukraine and Russia, moreover the echo of the same recently in Sydney, as well as all over the world. Therefore, at this time we seek today's wise, learned men and scholars, who seek God today, as those sages of the past, who posed the question: "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East, and have come to worship Him" (Matt. 2: 2). Where are those that still follow the Star of Bethlehem to find Christ – the Sun of Righteousness? The answer lies deep within each of us who proclaim His Incarnation.

Christianity announces the "good news of a great joy which will come to all the people" (Lk. 2:10-11) – Christ the God-man is incarnate in the flesh. The one that existed before the beginning of time is now born in time of the Ever Virgin Mary and constantly being born in human hearts, seeking a place for Himself in each of us – without exception. Let us offer Him, therefore, instead of a dark cave, an honourable heart and instead of a hardened manger, a humble soul that He, as a stranger in this world from birth may enter and abide in the Holy

Spirit. Let us offer ourselves to Him for only then will we be able from our whole heart, which is filled with Him, and all our soul, which is illumined by Him, to joyfully and truthfully exclaim:

TRULY, HE IS BORN!

Bishop Irinej

The Serbian Orthodox Church, Metropolitanate of Australia and New Zealand

The Salvation Army

The angels song echoed across the hills of Bethlehem on that first Christmas, and now cascades down through the centuries, “Peace on the earth...”. Yet today as on that first Christmas night, there is a deep and unsatisfied longing for peace in so many corners of our world. The message of Christmas however is that peace is possible. Not simply an absence of conflict, but a deep and abiding peace that seeks alternatives to violence and pursues the best for others.

This Christmas season, may the reign of the Prince of Peace born in Bethlehem extend through His church around the world bringing hope, light and peace to who long for a word of good news. The shepherds left the side of the manger rejoicing, and declared what they had come to know from the angels, to be true. So may His church today rejoicing, proclaim peace, bring good news and proclaim salvation.

Let there be peace on earth – a turning away from violence and a turning toward one another in love – and let it begin with us.

It is our prayer this Christmas season that you might experience afresh the deep peace and of the presence of the Prince of Peace and may it overflow from your life to all that you meet throughout the coming year.

Commissioner Floyd J. Tidd and Commissioner James Condon

Territorial Commanders, Australian Southern Territory and Australian Eastern Territory