

2016 Christmas Messages from Leaders of Christian Churches in Australia

In the gospel of John, we read *'the Word became flesh and lived among us'* (John 1:14). We have heard this text many times; we repeat it in the Creed. Yet the words continue to invite us to explore the depths contained within them.

As I stand on the crowded station each evening, waiting for the train that will take me home, I watch the faces of those who pass by. Youthful faces with their beauty sometimes hidden by worry or anxiety, faces of children showing excitement – or tiredness - at the beginning or end of an adventure, parents holding children safely, aged faces tired after the day's labour ...just a few of the many faces that pass by me.

As I walk to or from the station, I notice how others walk: some hurriedly, perhaps towards another engagement or just hurrying home; others struggling – especially with stairs - because of infirmity or disability; children sometimes skipping; parents carrying a baby as well as a stroller and shopping.

Whether they are people whom we can call by name or simply strangers, especially at this time they speak to me of the mystery of the Word becoming flesh. Jesus became one with us – not just one with me – but one with all of these people who pass by me or walk with me. Each then speak to me of that mystery.

As I reflect on Jesus and his mission, I sometimes think about his hope for our world- our world which is far more complex than the world in which he lived. How do we make it a place of peace and love? How can the peace of Christ be real and tangible in our world? What is he calling us to be here in this time?

Perhaps Christ's gift this Christmas is the invitation to recognize his presence in others, to bring peace to every encounter.

In this time when we celebrate the Prince of peace, may you and all you love experience his peace.

*Sr Elizabeth Delaney, General Secretary
National Council of Churches in Australia*

(NB. In the Western Church, Christmas is celebrated on December 25. Most Orthodox Churches will celebrate the Feast of the Nativity on January 7.)

The 13 messages follow.

For more information, contact the NCCA Secretariat on 8259 0800.

Anglican Church of Australia

Christmas is for everyone

Increasing 'Tribalism' was noted in my recent public conversation as a factor in asylum seeker policy. By "Tribalism" I mean the increasing divisions around issues and our inability to speak and engage creatively to develop satisfactory societal solutions.

Our need to speak openly and respectfully to one another is too often trumped by the deliberate and often aggressive closing down of opposing viewpoints. Thus, we see the silencing of dissent around issues such as asylum seekers, freedom of speech, climate change and indigenous wellbeing.

While the fundamentals of our democratic society are said to lie in a free press, free association and an independent judiciary, this assumes that all people are of innate worth and dignity. Tribalism undermines this basic tenet. Tribalism declares that my 'tribe', my co-religionists, are of greater worth and dignity than the rest and hence to be favoured and protected, no matter at what cost to others.

Can such "tribalism" be overcome and society built?

I believe hope is found in the greeting of the angel heralding Jesus' birth to shepherds, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy *for all the people.*' (Luke 2:10)

God's love in the Christ child is for 'all people': 'God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ' (2 Corinthians 5:19). What good news! Praise God! No "tribalism" here!

This Christmas, may we value and dignify all people because Christ came to bring joy to 'all the people'.

May welcome and hospitality to all people reign this Christmas, and throughout the coming year.

Christmas is for everyone.

*Archbishop Philip Freier, Primate
Anglican Church of Australia*

Catholic Church in Australia

Dear Friends,

Christmas is a special time when we remember God's closeness to us and *our* responsibility to become peacemakers. In this season of peace and goodwill we see our God, the maker of all things visible and invisible, reduced to the most vulnerable of creatures; *another* little Middle Eastern boy caught up in homelessness, poverty and a cruel cycle of violence. Yes, our God gave up *everything* in order to become one with us. You cannot get closer than that! He comes to us, and stays with us, especially in times of difficulty and loneliness.

We might say that Christmas is the feast of "closeness". It is the time when family and friends who are separated – by geography, by hurt or anger, or simply by the distances created by time – come together again to celebrate this joyous feast and to renew their bonds with one another and, we hope, with Christ.

Christmas reunions can be wonderful. They can also open old wounds and bring back painful memories. To make Christmas joyful we must be able to forgive one another and let go of past injuries – real and imagined.

My prayer for you therefore, is that you will feel God's closeness this Christmas and become instruments of peace in the New Year ahead! Let us keep the lost and abandoned close to our hearts.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

*Archbishop Denis J Hart, President
Australian Catholic Bishops Conference*

Chinese Methodist Church

Come to the True Centre of Christmas

I am not very sure how many people of this materialist humanist age accept the Biblical account of Christmas as a true story. They probably find strange the description of angels talking to human beings, and of an angel choir singing the first Christmas carol from the sky. They find it difficult to relate to the two virgin lovers (actually two persons betrothed to each other) in the story who have leading roles, not for their lovers' passion, but for their dreams and visions. The account of the virgin lady conceiving and giving birth to a baby boy strains their credulity. As people proud of their personal autonomy, they scoff at the notion that the newborn child at the centre of the story would decide the course of their destiny.

The Christmas story is therefore, on one hand, met with scepticism by those who do not believe in God or in miracles. On the other hand, "the spirit of Christmas", whatever that means, is eagerly employed by the commercial world to service the interest of its fanfare and crass profit. Whether it is one hand or the other, or cynically both, there is no denying the fact that Jesus Christ, the child at the centre of the Christmas story, was born and lived at a point in history more than two thousand years ago. And it is hard to deny the fact that, in his life, death and amazing resurrection, he did transform human history by uplifting the lives of his followers and their neighbours, and he continues to do so. The question now is whether he will indeed decide our destiny, and I, like many who have come to know the Christmas child, am certain he will. For he is real.

So I invite you to come and believe in Jesus Christ, and let your scepticism be turned into reverent wonder. Come and have your share in the story of the awesome transformation of our world through your faith in him. Come and find your highest destiny secure in the true centre of Christmas.

God grant you peace and joy as you continue to celebrate the coming of His Beloved Son.

*Bishop Dr James Kwang
Chinese Methodist Church in Australia*

Churches of Christ in Australia

Next Sunday I'll be singing a carol that includes the wonderful words: "Light and life to all he brings". This hymn echoes the Christmas story of John, who wrote:

"In (Christ) was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

When we pick up our newspapers (or our phones) we can be overwhelmed with a sense of darkness. Dark news sells papers and generates cyber hits. But this can twist our perspective; we can lose sight of the love and light revealed by Christ. We can forget the thousands of daily acts of kindness inspired by Christ's example. We can forget about those who listen to the distressed, who feed the hungry, who care for the vulnerable. We can fail to see goodness, wonder, beauty, hospitality, generosity. We may neglect thankfulness, rest and worship.

I pray that this Christmas season will be one of realignment, renewal, and hope. May you know God's love expressed through others. May the light and life Christ warm and inspire your heart, and the hearts of all those dear to you.

*Janet Woodlock, Federal Coordinator
Churches of Christ in Australia*

The Congregational Federation

A Gift to the World

One of the great Advent hymns is the stately, processional plainchant that starts:

*O come O come Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the son of God appears
Rejoice rejoice
Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel*

It's a bit different to most of the popular run of songs associated with Christmas which generally include reference to babies, goodwill and love done up in a comfortable Christmas card-like setting.

Tucked into the Christmas story are some episodes more like this advent hymn than the better-known incidents of shepherds, wise men and angels. For example, most people who are shown babies tend to enthuse over how pretty they are. Not so Simeon the prophet who announced when he saw Jesus, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel."

The Jewish people of the time had been waiting for the coming of a Messiah - or in Greek, a Christ - a person anointed by God, to liberate them from the Romans and establish his own rule. This is the background to the Christmas story.

As events played out, things took an unexpected turn. The Messiah did not drive the Romans from the country, did not set up a kingdom and did not come only to the Jewish people. Instead, the Messiah, born in a stable, of an unmarried mother, growing up in his early years as a refugee, brought a message of hope and freedom to everyone, everywhere, for all time.

Jesus' birth became a gift to the whole world.

What unexpected and great things lie ahead for newborn children! What as yet unseen potential lies there! Each new birth is a reminder of how the world changed as a result of Christ's birth and Christ's birth is a reminder of how a birth here and now could change the world. Anytime, anywhere. Don't think like the wise men that it will be a child born into privilege and wealth. Don't think that the child will have to grow into someone of great political

and military power. Think that the person who will have the greatest impact on the world was the child you noticed the least.

May the hope, peace and blessings of Christmas be with us each and every one. May we ourselves bring the hope, peace and blessings of Christmas to all.

Dr Joe Goodall, Moderator

The Congregational Federation of Australia and New Zealand

Coptic Orthodox Church, Diocese of Sydney

Today our souls rejoice as we celebrate the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ who came to our world to grant peace to the world and goodwill and joy to its inhabitants.

Therefore at His Birth the Angels sang, ***Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill towards men (Luke 2:14)***

Peace was granted to the world and goodwill to its inhabitants because the enmity ended and the middle wall of separation was broken.

To the earth that was cursed and its inhabitants who have sinned a great light has shone as it is written , ***the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned (Matthew 4:16).***

In an age of fear, terrorism and decline in morality we need the light and peace of the Babe of Bethlehem Christ the saviour to restore rebuild love harmony and unity in a fractured world.

We ask Christ our Lord to bless our families children and youth and our entire nation and preserve it cultivate it with all goodness.

May the coming New Year be one of grace & prosperity for you all.

May Christ our Lord, born in Bethlehem, bless our beloved country Australia; fill us with inner peace, comfort and joy.

Bishop Daniel

Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Sydney & Affiliated Regions

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia

To all the Clergy and devout faithful of our Greek Orthodox Archdiocese
Brother concelebrants and beloved children in Christ

*“Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy
for all the people” (Luke 2:10)*

With these words, the angel tried to console the fear of the shepherds who were in the field on that night of the unprecedented Theogony, according to which God, who, in all things is uncontainable, humbled himself into the narrow limits of the human person so that He might guide us towards the boundless glory of God.

These words are altogether timely for today as well

What however is the anthropological and salvific content of the words of the angel? What is the significance of this decisive night which separates the world from heaven?

Unequivocally, it is the words of the angel: *“Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people”*.

I have to announce, it says, a great joy which is not common. A joy which does not end.

It is the joy, that God lowered the heavens and is now with us. And He will remain with us always as the *Emmanuel* which means *“God is with us”*.

This joy is great and indestructible, since it is destined for everyone, for all humanity, it is a joy *“for all people”*.

Joys which are not for everyone are small joys; they are joys which are depressing, joys which are sinful.

People seek for themselves and for *“their own”* such small joys, which divide and bring human persons into discordance. God, however, bestows joys which unite and build up, because they are joys directed *“for all people”*. And above all these joys, there is the great joy of the Incarnation of the Only-begotten Son of God.

It is this unprecedented and incomparable joy which expels the fears of the night and of death.

This joy unites the earth with the heavens, and this is the only joy which restores relations and reconciles people amongst themselves

It is this angelic message which we also have to repeat once again this year to ourselves and to others.

“Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people”.

May this message, therefore, illuminate our troubled life.

To God the Word who became Human for us all, be the glory, honour and worship to the ages of ages. Amen.

With fervent prayers to God.

*Archbishop Stylianos, Archbishop of Australia
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia*

Religious Society of Friends in Australia (Quakers)

As we prepare food and gifts for family and friends at Christmas, we are mindful of those near and far who are suffering poverty and an uncertain future. We contribute to the Christmas Bowl and pray that those who suffer will find peace.

On Christmas day most of us set aside time to be with family and friends and extend a welcome to those who are without family or friends. Around the table we share good food and uplifting fellowship, give thanks for the love we share and for the bounty of this earth.

We welcome the Light of love which strengthens us, reconciles us and draws us into community. Christ’s work in us is the new birth. The Light of love is alive, working amongst us. Let us give thanks, celebrate and walk in that light.

*Josephina Jordan, Presiding Clerk,
Religious Society of Friends, Australia*

The Salvation Army

For centuries Christians throughout the world have lived in anticipation of the coming again of the Christ. The Advent Season reminds us again both of the first coming of Christ as a little baby and then ultimately the coming return of Jesus as the King of Glory. It is in this understanding that the Church celebrates the certainty of hope that the virgin birth in Bethlehem first brought to the world.

The words of Isaiah are a welcomed and relevant message to our troubled world today: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.” It reminds us again that, despite the commercialised trappings of the world so prominently displayed over the Christmas season, there are those in our communities and neighbourhoods who walk in darkness and lack hope for the future. The Salvation Army remains continually grateful for the support of so many across Australia who support and partner with us in the good news message of bringing light and hope to so many in Australia.

The message first announced by the heavenly host to the shepherds on that first Christmas night is still the message that can bring good news to all humanity - a message of light and hope to all – “a Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord”.

It is our prayer that you will know and walk in the light of Christ and reflect His light to those around you. We echo the prayer of the Apostle Paul: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”, both now and in the year that awaits.

*Colonel Mark Campbell, Chief Secretary-in-charge
The Salvation Army
Australia Eastern Territory*

*Colonel Graeme Rigley, Chief Secretary-in-charge
The Salvation Army
Australia Southern Territory*

Uniting Church in Australia

I greet you on behalf of the Uniting Church in Australia in the name of Jesus Christ, grace and peace to you and your loved ones this Christmas season.

The Message Bible renders Matthew chapter 5, verses 14 and 16 beautifully: *“We are here to be light, bringing out the God colours in the world. Shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God.”*

Jesus’ birth and life was all about humanity becoming enlightened, showered by the light and love of God. Inspired by and opened to, the God colours of the amazing creation and the abundant life which God in Jesus intends for each of us. The Message then exhorts us to shine, to be generous with our lives, hospitable, welcoming and loving to others.

We can all do with a reminder that this is to be our personal response and responsibility as the followers of Jesus. We are to make the world a brighter place, our generous lives can enable others to see the God colours of creation around them and experience a richer life within.

This passage also reminds us that as Christian community God’s love is given for us to in-turn give it away, to connect generously with the wider communities in which we live. There are so many who need to be showered with light and invited to see the God colours of our world. How does your community of Christ reflect God’s love to the community in which you live?

Finally this word also has a nation implication: *“keep open house”*. This instruction is so contra to our closed shores for those seeking refuge, epitomised tragically in the proposed new

legislation to prevent people ever coming to Australia. Those who are in the depth of despair and darkness of detention need Australia as a nation to shine light into their darkness and to be generous and open to them.

Jesus, the light and love of God personified. This Christmas season may I encourage us all as individuals and as communities of Christ to live generously, to give selflessly and to love unconditionally. Finally friends, let us pray for our Parliament's to embody this generosity of spirit which is life giving.

May you, your loved ones and communities experience anew the God colours of our world.

*Stuart McMillan, President
Uniting Church in Australia*

Australian Baptist Ministries

I'll Be Home for Christmas...if only in my dreams!

What do Whitney Houston, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, and Michael Buble' all have in common? Each of them has recorded a version of the Christmas song "I'll be Home for Christmas".

The second stanza of the song ends with the line "I'll be home for Christmas if only in my dreams". This will be the sad reality for many people in our world this Christmas season, from the homeless people in our major cities to those suffering as the Syrian crisis continues.

The Monthly magazine in its November 2016 edition reported the current situation with homelessness in Australia. A City of Melbourne survey, taken on the morning of 7 June this year, counted 247 people (195 men, 35 women, 17 unidentified) sleeping rough in the CBD. A similar street count by the City of Sydney, which conducts the survey twice a year, found 394 rough sleepers in August. Of course this is just the most visible sign of the wider homelessness crisis in Australia. It is estimated that 105,000 people including 17,000 children will be homeless this Christmas. Home for these fellow Australians is just a dream.

In the middle-east since mid-2014, ISIS has been carrying out a terror campaign against Christians, Yazidis, Shias, and other religious minorities in Iraq and Syria. A home safe from the mass murders, torture, systematic rape, and sexual enslavement would be a dream come true. The necessary current campaign against the ISIS stronghold of Mosul will add more death, destruction and homelessness and shattered dreams.

However some might be home by Christmas. The Federal Government's recent announcement about the refugee resettlement program with the USA heralds a welcome breakthrough for people still languishing on Nauru and Manus Island. It is not clear when they will be in their new homes in the USA, probably not this Christmas but hopefully next.

At the first Christmas as the Bible narrative records in Luke and Matthew's accounts, there was no home either for the birth of the much-anticipated son of God. And that birth was soon followed by the family's refugee flight to Egypt as King Herod unleashed his destruction on boy babies. This record of Jesus' birth and escape as a refugee reminds us that God is present in difficult situations and has not left us without hope for a better future. The Christmas exclamation of "Immanuel", God with us, is just as sustaining in the crisis of our private worlds as it was at Jesus' birth.

This Christmas as we celebrate this paradoxical event of the birth of a homeless refugee baby boy who was destined to change the course of human history let's be:

- * thankful to God for the security of the homes that will be the places where we celebrate,
- * generous to homeless people by our welcoming hospitality and gifts,
- * hopeful that the refugee resettlement will provide safe places for those still in offshore detention centres,
- * and above all, responsive to God's gift of restoration and peace through the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus.

*The Reverend Keith Jobberns, National Ministries Director
Australian Baptist Ministries*

Australian Christian Churches

A Gift That Keeps On Giving

I love this time of year because it is uplifting and positive; and we say things that we really should say every day. For those special people in our lives, we go one step further – we give them gifts. Many go further still, digging deep and donating to those battling with life's challenges. It may do a little damage to our bank accounts, just to show the extent of our love, but that's the reality, though: Love costs.

This is a reflection of what this season is all about – a celebration of an extravagant gift that came at great cost to the Giver.

The scripture declares, 'For God so loved the world, that He gave his one and only son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.' (John 3:16)

Some gifts received this year may last a lifetime. Sadly, other material items may break or wear out, or, maybe like the Pokémon craze, they'll simply go out of style.

Long after we take down the Christmas tree, and the sentiment of the season subsides, the real reason for the season remains – and His name is Jesus.

For He is the gift that keeps on giving: Life to all who believe.

*Wayne Alcorn, National President
Australian Christian Churches*

Seventh-day Adventist Church

To best understand the Christian story about Jesus who died on the cross of Calvary, it is good to look in on an unpretentious detached room in Bethlehem over thirty years before. It was here that Jesus was born. It was here that God came to humanity in the most extraordinary way. He became one of us! his is the amazing Christmas story.

There are various stories that are told of the prince and the pauper, where one exchanges places with the other for a while. But this is different. Real different. God chooses to become a man, really and truly human. He understands what it means to grow, to learn, to laugh and to cry. Our Creator made a choice to become one with His creation. And He went all the way – to death.

And that death was for us. We humans had gotten ourselves into such a serious mess called sin. The only outcome possible was eternal annihilation, unless... unless God did something that only He could do. If we were to be saved, God would have to become one of us, get it right and then, taking our sins on Himself, die for us. Those who believe in Jesus are assured of eternal life!

This is the story of a Creator God who loves His creation – loves us... loves you... loves me. It is the story of belonging and hope. That is why Christmas is so important and a time of joy!

*Pastor Ken Vogel, General Secretary
Seventh-day Adventist Church*
