

2021 Christmas Messages from Leaders of Christian Churches in Australia

One part of the story of the birth of Jesus begins with the phrase “In those days”. These few words locate the events that unfold in Bethlehem in a remembered specific reality. The Roman empire under Caesar Augustus was vast and expanding. Bethlehem was a small town in a very small part of that empire. The contrast of power and vulnerability could not be greater.

In such a world of contrast and power a baby is born. A child whose birth attracts attention and creates such fear and danger that refuge in Egypt is the safest option.

A reality for people in this period of time was that peace (Pax Romana) was maintained through fear. Into this world is born ‘the Prince of Peace’ and on whose shoulders power will rest.

The peace that is revealed in Jesus transforms people and situations. The most marginalised are made the centre of the story. Discrimination based in illness or disability is overcome. Women and children are affirmed, and violence does not have the last word. Peace is revealed as people focussed with prophetic strength.

I invite you to join together and pray for such a revelation of peace this Christmas. Can we hope for a growth in gracious compassion, justice for the marginalised and a renewing care of the earth? We pray for such a healing and renewing peace this Christmas.

*Rev John Gilmore, President
National Council of Churches in Australia*

(NB. In the Western Church, Christmas is celebrated on 25 December 2021.
Most Orthodox Churches will celebrate the Feast of the Nativity on 7 January 2022.)

14 messages follow.

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

Anglican Church of Australia

What words come to mind when you think of Christmas? Family, friends, food, gifts, fun... all these are indeed good. When we dig down a little deeper, they are tied together with the most important aspect of Christmas – love. The love we share with our family and friends, the love we express in generosity to others, the love of children’s delight and laughter. Yet, this love is seen in its greatest clarity in God’s love for the whole of creation in coming amongst us as a vulnerable, helpless baby.

Our society appears to be becoming more and more vexed and polarised – the vaxers vs anti-vaxers, climate change activists verse sceptics, State and Federal governments divided over Covid response, increasing global tensions, issues of honesty and integrity in our leaders, and the list goes on. There is a lot of stress in the world right now.

Into this world God continues to speak his message of love. As followers of Jesus his love needs to be our motivation and our action. It is hugely important that we treat each other respectfully and focus on what is good for others and our society and to do that with graciousness, acceptance, and generosity. Our love mirroring God’s love will bring hope and healing to this broken and divided world.

The simple story of a baby in a manger is dismissed by many, yet it continues to be a light of hope that shines eternal as it is the birth of God in human form, coming to us in love. This is the sign that God has love and hope for the world. As such the message of Christmas, the message of God’s extravagant love, offers a real alternative for a flourishing life.

***And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son,
full of grace and truth.***

John 1:14

As we come again to this Christmas time, I encourage us to ponder afresh the love of God seen most clearly in the coming of Jesus to bring hope to the poor, release for the captive, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed and to proclaim to all the Lord’s favour (Luke 4:18-19). And to respond to this love by loving God and neighbour.

With every blessing this Christmas and in the year ahead.

*The Most Reverend Geoffrey Smith, Archbishop of Adelaide, and Primate,
Anglican Church of Australia*

Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese

“Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which is translated, ‘God with us’.” (Matthew 1: 23)

The Nativity of Christ in the flesh – Christmas is the new start towards Divinity after ignoring His command through sin. The Creator of the universe came to dwell among us. He came to be united with human race, to share our pain and struggles, in order to lift us up into a new reality.

Jesus Christ did not come as an angel or as a prophet who simply spoke the word of God. God become one of us, “and dwelt among us.” (John 1: 14). He incarnated, that He came to our world with a real birth from the Ever-Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit in order to remain eternally with us and like us humans in every way except a sin. Jesus Christ became an integral and eternal part of our human family. His presence is not related to just His time, but His presence is eternal. He is truly with us and among us. And we believe in His words, when He says: **“I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.”** (Matthew 28: 20). And it is good to know that Christ is not with us only during our hours of prayer, peace and happiness, but even more so in our turbulent days of doubt and weakness, in our hours of fear and uncertainty. The awareness of our Lord Jesus Christ’s presence should strengthen and inspire us at all times, especially during these days of pandemic, during these days of instability and unrest. But always remember what the Angels told the Shepherds the day of the Nativity of Christ: **“Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, Who is Christ the Lord.”** (Luke 2: 10-11)

The message of Christmas is this: in the midst of pain there is good news, in the midst of suffering there is joy and in the midst of disunity Jesus Christ has a message for all people. But nowadays Christmas for some is a time of family, friends and blessing. Yet for others, Christmas is tainted by the sadness of loss, financial hardship and disappointed dreams. This year we are approaching the Holy Season with an obvious heaviness in our hearts. Stay in the hope, approach Him with trust, and you will feel His presence and His peace shadowing our hearts and lives. And during these blessed days, we cannot forget our Frontline Workers who gave themselves, day and night, to keep us safe during this pandemic. We pray the our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Immanuel, to grant them and all of you His heavenly blessings, and to protect the whole world and our beautiful country Australia. And wishing you a Holy Nativity Feast and a New Year 2022, full of the grace of God, peace, seasonable weather and prosperity.

*His Eminence Metropolitan Basilios, Archbishop
Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines*

Assyrian Church of the East

After experiencing a difficult year burdened with trials and uncertainties, here we are coming to the end of 2021, preparing ourselves once more to celebrate the birth of Christ renewed with hope and optimism. The event of the birth of Christ is the bright light that pierced the dark night of Bethlehem enlightening the hearts and souls of those who awaited God's salvation. He still, even today, is the light that shines in our hearts and gives us hope for peace and tranquillity. He is the only hope that humanity can depend on in times of crisis and trials. He is always ready to extend His hand and save us from our pains and sufferings. He is our healer, the eternal promise of hope, eternally present with us with His sweet and caring voice declaring; **'I am always with you until the end of time.'** Matt 28:20

Let us join together, during these festive times of His glorious birth, in praising Him for His mercy and compassion, praying to Him;

"Come you earthly and heavenly ones. Wonder and be astonished at the greatness of the mercy. By which our race has come to the great heights of the incomprehensible Godhead. Let heaven and earth, and all that is in them, confess Him who exalted our race. Who has renewed our image and wiped out our iniquity. He has called us by his Name and has made all things subject to us. He is worthy of glory from all mouths. Who has lifted us above all. Blessed is the Compassionate one, who, when we sought him not, came forth to seek us and rejoiced in giving us life. Let us all give praise to him. Forever and ever." Amen

*His Beatitude Mar Meelis Zaia AM, Metropolitan
Assyrian Church of the East, Diocese of Australia, New Zealand and Lebanon*

Catholic Church in Australia

Christmas is a time for coming together – families, friends, communities – and there's a reason for that. It's not just that coming together when and as we can is more important than ever in a time of pandemic when isolation and separation have hit hard. It's also because at another level Christmas celebrates the overcoming of the most fundamental separation of all, the sundering of heaven and earth, God and humanity. Once God becomes one of us, heaven and earth come together for ever; they become one flesh. And the overcoming of that separation means that there is no separation that cannot be overcome, no chasm that cannot be bridged. That truth inspires the prophetic vision offered by Pope Francis in Fratelli Tutti, just as it inspires the work of the National Council of Churches. In a world of ever deepening polarisations – political, ideological, even religious – such a vision isn't an optional extra: it's absolutely essential. So too is Christmas. The festival began long ago as a celebration of the triumph of light over darkness in the northern world; but it's become a celebration of the triumph of communion over separation in every part of the world, even the Antipodes, and in every community and every heart. Glory to God and peace on earth.

*The Most Reverend Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Brisbane, Archbishop of Brisbane,
President, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
Catholic Church in Australia*

Chinese Methodist Church in Australia

Every year during the Christmas season, most people will be busy buying gifts and cards, giving presents to each other, and organising all-night Christmas parties. It is truly an occasion full of festive cheer. Many people are more interested in the festivities than Christmas itself; even Santa Claus has become the focus of Christmas. The true character of Christmas, however, is Jesus Christ, God's most precious gift to humankind.

Our Lord Jesus is God's Christmas gift of highest excellence to the world. This gift is most noble and excellent for it is from above. Jesus is GOD's SON, the image of God, the exact imprint of God's nature. Jesus is GOD - full of authority and greatness. He has all the glory, authority, status and majesty of God (Hebrews 1:3). Even though He was God, Jesus was willing to put aside his identity, status and power. He was willing to put aside the glory and power of above to come to earth and take the form of a servant, in the likeness of a man. In obedience to God's plan of salvation, he died on the cross.

Paul said in Philippians 2:9-11, **"Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."** Here, we see Jesus having an excellent name – a name that is above all names, for every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Here, we also see Jesus has an excellent status - every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, to worship him as Lord.

Dear friends, how marvellous is it that the Almighty One of all creation has come into our world, the infinite God becoming finite man? Let's share this wonderful message that our Lord Jesus is the most precious Christmas gift of all.

*Rev Dr Albert Wong, Bishop
Chinese Methodist Church in Australia*

Churches of Christ in Australia

The Hope of Christmas

Christmas encourages us to look back to better enable us to then look forward. The coming of Jesus 2000 years ago was to a world seeking freedom but, today, people are still looking for a better tomorrow, especially in rebuilding after COVID.

It is when we look to circumstances and people for improvement, though, that we often remain anxious and disappointed. Our greatest hope comes to our world from beyond it. It is found in Christ, the one who seeks to offer a secure and certain faith.

He is still knocking on the door of every heart, asking to enter, filling us with hope, awaiting our response.

The Bible says that as many as receive him and believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God. We are not children by virtue of our birth but his. He was the one who came that he might live among us, take our place, die for our sin. He was the one who embodied the good news of God when he rose to conquer death's power over anyone who would believe.

Today, when we open our hearts in response to God's gift of life, we then outwork his word and follow the leading of his Spirit. This aligns to our enjoyment of a relationship with the God of Heaven who transcends mere religious observance or Christian duty.

Jesus therefore remains our Christmas hope and the source of our unending confidence. The reality of his presence in and among us this Christmas reminds us that our best days as the Christian Church are still ahead!

*Rev Rob Nyhuis, Chair
Council of the Churches of Christ in Australia
Federation of Australia and New Zealand
Coptic Orthodox Church -Diocese of Sydney & Affiliated Regions*

Coptic Orthodox Church

Diocese of Melbourne and Affiliated Regions

Christmas message Luke 2:6-14

“So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloth, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”

Luke 2:6-7 NKJV

“Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

Luke 2:14 NKJV

Angels praising

1. Glory to God in the highest
2. Peace on earth
3. Good will toward men

1- Aim, God's work, highest

The aim of our lives is to give glory to God through everything we do. To glorify God through every action and every opportunity. Not to seek that glory for ourselves.

2- Peace, heart of peace, on earth

One of the most repeated phrases during the prayers of the Coptic Liturgy from the priest to the congregation is “peace be with you” and they respond, “also with your spirit”. The heart of a peaceful man is a great gift. To hold onto that gift and not traded it in under any circumstances. But to value it as it is the fruit of God living inside the heart of the faithful.

3- benefit to man, free salvation

The Bible states that God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7) and that Jesus taught it is better to give than receive (Acts 20:35) Being able to receive a gift with gratitude is a sign of a healthy, humble spirit, which is also pleasing to God.

A very happy feast of nativity from the Coptic church to all members and representatives of the NCCA.

*Fr Abanoub Atalla
Coptic Orthodox Church -Diocese of Melbourne & Affiliated Regions*

Diocese of the Armenian Church of Australia and New Zealand

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and goodwill among men”

Once again, it's the Christmas season, a time for renewal and a time for hope.

In the past year our faith and stamina were tested to the limit. The whole world order was shaken to its foundation. In the four corners of the world there were many earthquakes, fires, floods, wars, and famines. On top of all these we had to cope with Covid-19; there were tens of millions who suffered agony and pain, more than five million perished; because of isolation people still face psychological distress and economic hardship. It will take a while until the world might return to its usual way of life. One wonders if it will ever be the same.

As Christians we were barred from communal worship. Baptisms, weddings, requiem services were postponed throughout the year. It was not possible even to give communion to our believers.

“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor. 4:8-9).

As Christians we cannot give up hope, we do not accept defeat, we fight the evil whatever form it takes because we do not trust on ourselves, but in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Those of us, clergy and laity, who are entrusted with the church, we did our best to reach out to our faithful, people who had technological skills extended their help. New situations require new solutions. We shared the Divine Liturgy and the Sermon by live streaming and our Bible studies and talks on Zoom. We encouraged our faithful to be steadfast in their faith through personal conversations on the phone. We tried to communicate to everyone that even in our seclusion we were not alone, as a community of believers we are together as one family having Jesus, the true shepherd as our eternal leader.

May the light emanating from the manger in Bethlehem through the new-born Jesus renew our faith, fill us with hope and His eternal peace and love dwell in our hearts making us true children of light.

With Blessings,

*Archbishop Haigazoun Najarian, Primate
Diocese of the Armenian Church of Australia and New Zealand*

Greek Orthodox Church of Australia

Protocol No.: 1714

"dance for joy all the inhabited earth on hearing the pre-eternal Word appear as a new-born Child!" (Christmas Kontakion)

The remarkable rejoicing and bewildering beauty of Christmas has come upon us once again, inviting "all the inhabited earth" to go out and meet Him. The 'Son of God', who pre-eternally always was with God our heavenly Father, now becomes the 'Son of Man', encompassing, in this way, the entire world within his loving presence and offering all, without distinction and altogether freely, the true light of full knowledge (cf. Jn 1:17). Indeed, in the Person of our new-born- Saviour – that child born in the cave of Bethlehem - we behold the enduring unity between heaven and earth, the very inauguration of God's heavenly kingdom within the world.

It is precisely for this reason that the birth of our Lord constitutes, for St Paul, "the great mystery of godliness" (cf. 1Tim 3:16) to the extent that it reveals the super-abundant and unitive love of God for the entire world **"that whoever believes ... may not perish but may have eternal life"** (Jn 3:16).

Indeed, as the cause of our very being, our Lord not only comes to make known the Father and usher in His kingdom, but in so doing also gifts us with our 'well-being' —εὖ-εἶναι— and indeed our 'eternal well-being' —ἀεὶ-εὖ-εἶναι; a gift so compelling and so powerful that it is capable of uniting us all in his Person, but only if we give room for Him to live in us (cf. Gal 2:20).

This message of unfailing unity and love is all the more important for us to reflect upon today in these difficult times, when the extraordinary set of challenges, brought about by the pandemic, continue to remain with us: global unrest; the incalculable consequences surrounding the economic, social and mental well-being of people; political dissatisfaction; but above all, the divisive predisposition that we can perceive surfacing all the more emphatically between people-for example, the vaccinated and unvaccinated - wanting to remount the wall of partition destroyed by our Lord with His birth.

For this reason, let us be reminded that with the Incarnation, we now behold our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in our neighbour and our very neighbour becomes Christ for us; during this festive season of Advent, let us especially seek to embrace the 'other' with all our heart, because in so doing, we will have embraced our Lord Himself.

Wishing all a blessed and joyous Nativity, I remain,

Prayerfully yours,

*Archbishop Makarios, Primate
Greek Orthodox Church of Australia*

Religious Society of Friends in Australia (Quakers)

The Work of Christmas

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among all,
To make music in the heart.

Howard Thurman, from *The Mood of Christmas*, p. 23
Published and copyrighted by Friends United Press, 1985

Howard Thurman (1899-1981) was an African-American theologian, educator, and civil rights leader. He studied as a special student at Haverford College with Rufus Jones, a noted Quaker philosopher and mystic.

*Ann Zubrick, Presiding Clerk,
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia*

The Salvation Army

It's been another challenging year for many, but also a year that has been filled with opportunity. As leaders of The Salvation Army in Australia, we have been incredibly blessed to witness the innovation and support to us as a movement, so we can continue to serve those who need us most in the community.

Despite the difficulties and challenges of 2021, Christmas is a great reminder of the bright light Jesus shines in all our lives.

When the first Christmas took place over 2000 years ago, a bright star hung over a troubled world. A choir of angels led a new song, **"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom he is pleased"** (Luke 2:14 NET).

When Jesus was born, he shone a light into the darkness, bringing joy and peace to all. As we celebrate Christmas this year, the many light displays are a clear reminder to us all that Jesus is the Light of the World.

Each Christmas, as the light displays go up around us, may we remember and celebrate the gift of Jesus. **"For this is the way God loved the world: He gave his son, his one and only son. And this is why: so that no one needs to be destroyed, by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life"** (John 3:16 MSG).

We wish you a Christmas filled with deep meaning this year. Our prayer is Jesus' light may shine bright in all our lives, Emmanuel, God with us.

God bless you.

*Commissioners Janine and Robert Donaldson, National Leaders
The Salvation Army, Australia*

Uniting Church in Australia

As we move towards Christmas, I find myself reflecting on the last couple of years and all that we have seen and experienced.

The measures to prevent the spread of COVID have affected all of us one way or another and we continue to be anxious as new variants emerge and any sense of being able to plan is again threatened.

I am both grateful for the way these measures have saved so many lives and for the extraordinary hard work of so many front-line workers and also aware of all that we have missed during the last two years and all that the virus has revealed about our nation.

We have missed time with family and friends and the marking of moments of commemoration and celebration. We are more aware of how many people are lonely and suffer from social isolation.

The virus has exposed the inequality in our country, with the poorest suffering the most, in a country that lacks an adequate social safety net. As businesses have suffered many people are worried about their financial future and job security

Many are concerned about the wellbeing of our young people and worry about our older friends and family, particularly those in aged care.

I am frustrated about the lack of equitable distribution of vaccines around the world and watch as the call of First Nations for Voice, Treaty, Truth falls on deaf ears in the land we call Australia.

I am concerned about growing tension in our region, and about climate change and the very real possibility of earth that can no longer sustain life in any meaningful way. I am angry at the lack of real action emerging from COP26.

For Christians, Christmas is the celebration of Jesus birth. In the birth of Jesus God becomes fully human. God enters all that causes us worry, sorrow, and anger. God with us is the promise of God's presence in our worry and anxiety, reminding us we are not alone. We are loved by God. God is with us in our anger giving us the courage to use our anger to act.

God calls each of us to use our anger and sorrow to make space for those whose voices are most ignored, to be engaged in the work of repair of creation, and to be advocates and activists for a more just, compassionate, and equitable nation and world.

As we celebrate Christmas, I pray that our will is strengthened to work for the ways of God, which lifts up the lowly, feeds the hungry with good things and brings down the powerful (Luke 1:52-53).

*Rev Sharon Hollis, President
Uniting Church in Australia Assembly*

Australian Christian Churches - ACC

'THE ANTICIPATION OF CHRISTMAS'

The countdown to Christmas always comes with growing excitement and expectation; and you can sense that there is great anticipation for Christmas 2021, following a year of unexpected challenges and hardship on many fronts.

Significantly, there was great anticipation for that very first Christmas. The Prophet Isaiah had foretold of the birth of Jesus around 750 years before His birth:

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." – Isaiah 9:6

We are all looking for peace right now, in the midst of turbulent times. While 2020 brought with it the challenge of a global pandemic, it was incredibly uplifting to see people standing together in unity, encouraging and supporting each other. We ended that year with a sense of hope, and the assumption that 2021 would be a smooth path forward. However, things took an unexpected turn and sadly, this past year has been marked with divided opinions and tensions, bringing separation and segregation.

More than ever, there is a great longing for peace in an unstable world. The words of Isaiah bring comfort and assurance, reminding us that Jesus is the "Prince of Peace" – the one who calms the storm and quiets the raging voices.

Our prayer is that Christmas 2021 will be a time when people everywhere will embrace the presence, the person and the power of the Son of God; that every heart may experience the real Peace that is in Jesus Christ.

*Wayne Alcorn, ACC National President
Australian Christian Churches- ACC*

Australian Baptist Ministries

Becoming a grandparent this year for the second time was an amazing experience filled with tears of joy, love and adoration. It is an overwhelming experience to hold a newborn baby so fragile, helpless and totally dependent on its mother and father. It made me realise again the absolute humility and sacrifice that Jesus Christ made by coming to earth in the form of a baby.

Picture this, God in three persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - the creator of our planet earth, which sits just the right distance from the sun to sustain life, where water, land, plants, fish, birds and animals can live. Then came the creation of humanity, the pinnacle of all creation. That same creating God, even though the Son was God, did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position and was born as a human being.

This Christmas we desperately need a Saviour by acknowledging sin and anticipating the greatest declaration possible. Born is King Jesus, the wait is over, the Kingdom of God is among us. His birth; our birth. We were "**helpless and dead in our sin**" (Romans 5:6; 12), "**without hope and without God in this world**" (Ephesians 2:12), but the birth of Christ changes everything.

We typically wait until New Year's Day to make resolutions, to start new habits, and to seek a fresh start but these often get tied purely to our own willpower, determination, and effort. Perhaps that's why so many of our resolutions fail. But Christmas invites us to new birth, because of the one birth that changed the world.

The babe of Bethlehem assures, enables and empowers our own re-birth ... over and over. That's something to celebrate. I am overwhelmed with the love of God to do this for humanity. That's the Christmas message!

*Rev Mark Wilson, National Ministries Director
Australian Baptist Ministries*
