



The Diocesan Centre
P.O. Box 89
(49 Lydiard Street Sth)
Ballarat Vic. 3353

T. (03) 5331 1183
E. bishop@ballaratanglican.org.au
www.ballaratanglican.org.au

22 December 2023

The Bishop's Christmas Message 2023

O come, O come Emmanuel - God with us

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St Francis of Assisi is credited with inventing the Christmas Crib. In a dark world where many people were illiterate the Holy family figurines, shepherds and animals and even richly clothed Wise Men entranced churchgoers with the wonder of the Christmas story.

And still today, many of our churches have Nativity scenes with Wise Men who come closer to the Crib as the traditional 12 days of Christmas unfold.

I think I've got three Crib sets at my house and one in the Registry! It's too many really!

I was deeply moved by a photograph of the Christmas Crib set up in the sanctuary of the Lutheran Church in Jerusalem this year.

In place of a hay filled stable, the Baby Jesus is resting on the top of a pile of broken concrete, shattered bricks and dust. There are no animals or shepherds, and Mary and Joseph are not in the scene either. The Baby is alone, surrounded by signs of hopeless despair and lifeless destruction.

Each night on the TV news we see this scene depicted in the terrible mayhem and destruction in Gaza.

In place of the angelic chorus is the sound of missile sirens.

The guiding star has been replaced by drones carrying explosives.

And instead of the lowing cattle and the silent adoration of the shepherds, are the tears and groans of the wounded and those who have lost their loved ones on both sides of the conflict.

We wait for the Wise Men to come bringing peace from the United Nations, or the Arab states or the North American power brokers, but instead we get political posturing.

O come, O come Emmanuel! God with us

We dare not retreat into a warm sentimentality about the Nativity as we see how the Holy Land is being torn apart by the machinations of international power politics: and by the internal self-destruction that has plagued this place for centuries.

Whether we have pro-Palestinian. or pro Zionist attitudes, it is so easy to slip into “othering” people who do not share our views. Slogans and easy judgements based on simplistic history and facile politics only add to the confusion, frustration, death and apparent Impasse of the current war between the Israeli State and the Palestinians trapped in Gaza.

This context is not so different from the context of the first Christmas. Ordinary people were squeezed by the massive forces of occupying Roman soldiers, the corruption and self-indulgence of puppet rulers, small underground resistance fighters (we would call them terrorists) and sectarian religious leadership that was deeply divided. This is the place where God chose to make his great appeal of Love. Compassion and Forgiveness. And this is still the message that resonates through the Holy Land to the rest of God’s world.

O come, O come Emmanuel – God with us.

God’s call to us this and every Christmas always comes to us from a broken place which seems to be on the edge of despair. This place is not just first century occupied Judea, or even today’s war-torn Gaza Territory,

but every place in our hearts and lives where we are tempted to easy judgements,

to dismiss those we don’t understand by labelling them as “other’,

by hurting those whom we should love best, our families and friends.

The Christmas message is always a call to Forgiveness, Love and Compassion – a call to encounter Hope once again.

It is a big challenge to proclaim Hope – a challenge in a seemingly hopeless war-ravaged Gaza, in Ukraine, and even in the little messes of our individual lives. It’s always easier to label, to “other” ,to despise, to hate, to blame, to belittle. God invites us every Christmas to hear and believe again in the possibility of Hope – a hope based on God’s promise at Bethlehem – Goodwill and Peace among all people.

It is Hope that does not depend on our frail faith, but on God’s commitment to us.

O come, O come Immanuel – God with us.

Our Christmas celebration then, is never just a sentimental remembrance of a longed for past, or a comforting nativity story. It is a celebration of God’s commitment to us, to all people and to his world. It is an invitation for us to be people of Hope, even amidst the shattered concrete, the broken bricks and the dust of despair, for these are the very places where Jesus, the Emmanuel comes – where God is with us.

May we have the courage to be *Christmas People* – people of Forgiveness, Compassion and Love. People who have glimpsed Hope., and who pray for, and work for, and speak about, and experience, Hope in a God who is always with us.

A happy and Holy Christmas.

Garry Weatherill
Christmas 2023.