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Sermon Series During COVID-19 The Bishop's Christmas Message

The Birth of Jesus

Luke 2.1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Bishop's Christmas Message

This has been a tough year for everyone. Here in Australia we have been fortunate to avoid some of the worst consequences of the Corona Virus, but still there are too many families mourning the unexpected deaths of loved relatives. And there is a lingering sense of unease until there are secure and available vaccines.

But it is good to celebrate this Christmas as we can – we have all learned about resilience, and discipline and care of neighbour and the value of friends and family in new ways over the last 10 months. It is important not to waste these insights, but to let our relationships become deeper and richer, and to avoid the cynicism and blaming that only damages everyone.

Some of our context this year helps us to understand more clearly the world view of those who participated in the first Christmas celebration.

As we have experienced, some of us for the first time, the real fragility of our own lives, we can identify more closely with the fragility of that little Palestinian family who travelled to Bethlehem for the Census. We can understand the transport difficulties, the unpredictability of border crossings, the difficulty with housing suitability.

The underclass, the shepherds are like those difficult neighbours and family members whom we keep at the fringes of our lives as much as we can. Yet somehow, they wheedle into our celebrations almost against our better judgement. And this year we can't really pretend we have mistakenly forgotten them – we know that they belong, even if our meagre hearts would wish them elsewhere.

Even the angels seem somehow more believable. There were times during the height of the pandemic's second wave when we have been really aware of those angels who have cared for our sick ones, and prepared food for nursing home residents and washed the floors and sanitised the seats when we couldn't see, but we knew we were safer because they put themselves at risk.

There's been a silent ministry of angels too, in the many elderly single people who have endured great solitude for weeks on end in order to play their part in keeping our communities safer. So many of those trapped in solitude have also supported us with their prayers and the love expressed in little notes of encouragement or unexpected phone calls with words of hope.

And the animals. All around us we have seen dogs being walked or walking their owners with renewed energy and pace. The swans and the ducks at Lake Wendouree seem to have reproduced at record rates, almost defying COVID-19 to try and touch them! And in the quiet of late night, with no traffic noises there has been the rustling of ring-tailed possums around the garage rafters, and swift sightings of rats running along the tops of fences. The animals at the Crib at the first Christmas were probably not so silent and not so tender. The animals remind us all that we share this mysterious life with them, and that we depend upon them almost as much as they depend on us.

There have even been wise men and women who have helped guide us through the most difficult days of the pandemic. Whatever you may think of Premier Daniel Andrews, it is hard to think of another leader who fronted a barrage of media interest every day for over a hundred days as with strong medical advice he sought to encourage Victorians to protect themselves and others from COVID19. Our wise ones have been ambiguous gifts, like they always are, and their bickering and political posturing have recalled to us the reality of all political life when it forgets its service imperative. They have brought us new and unexpected gifts like face masks and the now ubiquitous hand sanitizer. And the real gold they have brought is resilience and that deep humility that recognises that no one understands all the truth about anything.

So, my Christmas prayers this year are about belonging and hoping and trusting each other and God as we slide into 2021. Our celebrations may be muted, and the gatherings may be smaller, but what really matters is the quality of the love we bring to the Christmas table.

Robert Louis Stevenson, the author of *Kidnapped*, was a man of faith. He wrote this Christmas Prayer. May it be our prayer too, this Christmas and into the year ahead:

*Close the door of Hate and open the door of Love all over the world.
Let kindness come with every gift, and good desires with every greeting.
Deliver us from evil by the blessing that Christ brings,
And teach us to be merry with clear hearts. Amen.*

+ Garry Weatherill