

CHRISTMAS HOMILY 2021
PEACE, LOVE, JOY, GOOD WILL TO ALL
Lk 2.1-20 Is 9.1-7 Titus 2.11-14

(10.00am, 6.00pm Christmas Eve & 10am Christmas Day Masses: Rhyme Bible version too! “The Special Baby & The Shepherds”.)

(8.30pm & 11.00pm Mass Simon and Garfunkel “Silent Night”)

As usual, I go back every year to Christmas Eve 1968, when Apollo 8 left Earth’s bounds and headed for the Moon, the first time humans had escaped Earth’s gravity. As they circled the Moon, the astronauts read from Genesis, and we had the first full image of our Blue Planet (*on screen*) from space, now with almost 8 million inhabitants by 2022, and no walls or boundaries evident, reflecting our common humanity and the need to protect and preserve our precious planet, especially mindful at this time of peace and good will.

In our society, it’s a standard question, almost a mantra: **“What are you doing for Christmas?”** Well, here we are, actually present or else virtually, so I welcome you all, near and far to our Christmas Eucharist celebration with our St Therese’s Essendon community. It’s very good to see you here.

Who has seen *Love Actually*, a 2003 Christmas-themed romantic comedy? It’s one of my favourite films, diving into 10 different love stories, reflecting aspects of love and the complexities of relationships, and the fundamental importance of family. The opening scene has tearful, joyful and happy reunions depicted at Heathrow Airport in London. To my mind, this is particularly relevant to recent times, where families and even partners, perhaps particularly grandparents and grandchildren, have been separated because of COVID, both locally and internationally. (*At least we have WhatsApp, Skype and Zoom these days!*)

Perhaps our recent experiences highlight the importance of coming together and enjoying that time, something we can take for granted. Duncan Fine (writer and lawyer) sees it thus: *“As state borders finally open across Australia, we have just seen real-life reunions that look just like the film – albeit with a dash of caution as we try to understand the risks of the new Omicron variant.”*

So, here we are again, another year nearly gone, and a strange one at that, as this time last year we were looking forward to opening up and moving out of lockdowns, getting back to some semblance of normality, and here we are, in Melbourne, the longest lockdown city in the world, for over 260 days since March 2020. And we’re kidding ourselves if we think we are through it all yet. The danger is still out there, so let’s keep our distance, wear our masks in tight spaces, and get the booster when we can. It has been something of a nightmare, even moreso than last year, with all of the ongoing uncertainty and anxiety too. And now it’s necessarily back to mandatory masks at church and indoors outside home, so thanks for observing that requirement.

Nevertheless, Christmas has come once again, and here we are to celebrate together the mystery of life which Jesus enters as one of us. It has been a year of frustration for all of us, and yet, opportunities provided for learning to do things in new ways, testing the patience all the way.

Christmas always evokes happy and exciting childhood memories for me, from going to Christmas Mass to the early morning ritual of presents under the Christmas tree and the special treat of roast chicken, well before we heard of turkeys!! Then there was Epiphany to look forward to, to extend the season, as the wise men wandered in later. As the eldest of 5 children, my 4 younger siblings and their children might suggest that I never grew up, particularly when it comes to Christmas. I have to confess that my proclivity for singing and dancing Santas, reindeer, Christmas trees, flashing coloured lights and the like, has cost me much time and effort and a bit of money, in terms of the battery power required to sustain it all!! My main regret is that the days are too long to get the most out of the lights, as in the northern hemisphere, where I spent 3 lovely white Christmases in Ottawa, although the first in 1982, was more treacherous freezing rain than snow!

Then again, I like to get into the spirit of it all. Whilst we acknowledge it as a religious and spiritual celebration, it can’t be denied that it has become a time for families to gather, exchange presents, and spend

time together, and that's no bad thing. The critics might say it's all too commercial and secular, but I believe we have to engage with the true meaning of Christmas in the real world of which we are part. Besides, those in the shopkeeping areas and business need support in trying to get back on their feet, after a really tough and worrying time.

And now for the deeper spiritual faith side of what we celebrate: Barney Swartz (of the Centre for Public Christianity) writes with the heading: "*For many, there is still **no room at the inn***", the last 5 words being "*5 simple poignant words that almost uniquely convey rejection and humiliation*", as he puts it. The key point is thus: "*Luke emphasises the central point for the Christian faith: that the incarnate son of God was born into humble circumstances and spent his life on the margins of society, finding no place among the religious, political or legal establishments of the time... a powerful metaphor for the numberless on the margins of society... According to the UN, in mid-2021 there were more than 84 million forcibly displaced people – more than 1 in every 100 people on the planet.*"

Surely we have a moral and collective responsibility to do more to encourage our government to provide further aid and to be more compassionate to those who are in such a plight. "*If you consider that Jesus occupies those spaces, they are no longer the margins – they are where it's all happening, where God is, where truth is, where goodness and justice lie.*" "*The Christmas story is partly about seeking (or making) space in our lives; are we going to let in the sacred, are we going to let in God?*"

Stephanie Dowrick (spiritual writer and social activist) writes of Christmas as "*a universal story of hope for today's world, whatever you believe*", and that's no bad thing. "*Jesus' message of compassionate action and inclusion is just as relevant now as 2,000 years ago... His message of love and peace... has never been more relevant... He spoke of us belonging to one another without exception.... A choice for peace on earth. A magnificent and transformative choice for goodwill and wellbeing to all.*"

And finally an apt Christmas poem, but without rhyme!

When the Song of the Angels Is Stilled

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
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 people,
To make music in the heart.*

Howard Thurman (St Bernard's College Christmas Card for 2021)

And here's my Christmas story for 2021, titled "***Room for a Little One***" (by Martin Waddell & Jason Cockroft). It fits well with our theme of improving on ***no room at the inn!***

We need the Christmas spirit of peace and good will, ongoing, in abundance in our wonderful and diverse, but complex and troubled world of today, in order to make it better for our children and future generations, acknowledging Jesus' presence in our hearts and lives, and living His message of love.

A Happy or Merry and safe Christmas to all, near and far.