

## **Bishop's Christmas Message**

Why, after two thousand years, are we still celebrating the Christmas Story? Because, like the rest of the Gospel, it relates to the hopes and lives of people across the world.

For each of us, one of these hopes is the hope to be valued for who we are as individuals. The Christmas Story reminds us that, whatever others may think of us, each of us is of value to God. God loves us for who we are.

God values us whether we are young or old, rich or poor, famous or unheard of, believers or atheists. God loves us individually, regardless of whether we are able-bodied or disabled, popular or feel rejected, healthy or addicted to drugs.

As Christmas reminds us of this truth, it challenges us in many ways. They include the three following examples.

### *Christmas challenges negative self images*

Christmas challenges all who suffer low self esteem or a negative self image. It challenges anyone feeling worthless, a failure, or who feels so burdened by guilt that they imagine themselves beyond forgiveness.

Christmas celebrates the birth of the Son of God who came to reveal God's desire for an ever deepening personal relationship with each of us. God wishes us to accept this relationship in this life, and to deepen in it eternally after we die in heaven.

If we think ourselves worthless, it is confronting to reflect on the question: "Why would God want to love me for all eternity?" Perhaps we are inclined to dismiss this thought, rather than to reflect on it seriously.

This question challenges us to ask: "Am I keeping in mind always the ultimate purpose of my life – to decide to accept or to reject the relationship of heaven with God?" If our lives show that we have rejected God, this choice is accepted by God. Heaven is not imposed on us: we experience the eternal separation Jesus called "hell".

The point is that Christmas reminds us of God's desire for us to accept the relationship of heaven. God clearly does not see us as worthless.

### *Christmas challenges the troubled*

We live in a troubled society. So many people suffer inner conflicts, anger and stresses. These affect their relationships – and so there are troubled relationships in marriages and families; between friends and work colleagues. Many children are troubled because their parents were troubled.

The hearts of many are so troubled that they seek relief in drugs, excessive alcohol and passing sexual relationships. Some express troubled hearts by destructive behaviours.

Christmas promises 'peace on earth to all who enjoy God's favour' [Luke 2:]. This challenges all who are stressed and troubled to face the fact that there is another way – Christ's way, which leads to peace.

Who are those who 'enjoy God's favour'? Those who accept the eternal relationship of 'heaven'. We can experience peace instead of inner conflicts and turmoil to the extent that we relate with God now – praying, worshipping and living as Jesus taught.

### *Christmas challenges Australian society*

God's love and value for every human person challenges tendencies to devalue the individual in our society. These tendencies reflect our society's inclination to value people more for what they achieve than who they are.

People, for example, seem more likely to be accepted if they are wealthy or powerful or popular. From early years, we tend to want to be associated with some more than others. So often advertisements are aimed at the young rather than the elderly because of their spending power.

And so often it seems that decision makers at various levels of society value more those who contribute to the materialistic than the human aspects of our society. Do corporate executives, managers of resource companies and senior staff in banks really deserve salaries many times more than those of teachers, nurses, carers for the elderly and disabled and marriage counsellors? Do they really contribute more to the future shape and well-being of Australian society?

What does it say about Australia that in difficult times we consider financial cut backs in hospitals and the provision for those with psychiatric illnesses, that we allow acute shortages of beds in facilities for the aged?

I do not pretend to know the answers to questions of this kind, but does not the Christmas Story at least cause us to pause and consider whether the trends that stir the questions are consistent with the importance of every person to God?

### *Let us value each person in our lives*

Christmas is an opportunity to ask: 'Do I value each individual in my life?' Or do we value more those who agree with us, who can help us in some way or who have achieved?

To reflect the spirit of Christmas, let us show each person in our lives that we value him or her as an individual.

Let us challenge ourselves: 'Do I tend more to favour family members, friends and others who agree with me, who have achieved in some way, who are popular, wealthy or socially influential?' 'Do the elderly and sick individuals in my life feel valued by me, or a 'burden' to me?'

May each of us renew our appreciation for every person in our lives so that we enjoy the peace of all who enjoy God's favour this Christmas!

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