

The Christmas Message

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What's a Christmas message that might make sense in a year shaped by so much tragedy? There've been wars, persecuted minorities, extremist violence, political chaos, that terrible explosion, and the huge and ever-growing refugee crisis. And it's also a year where a series of natural catastrophes have hurt so many – mega-bushfires, mega-storms, earthquakes, floods, a volcanic eruption, rising sea levels, drought and heat waves. And on top of the human cost, there've been billions of wild and domestic creatures lost to our fires, and human-caused global extinction.

And of course there's the pandemic – families separated, accustomed freedoms withheld, livelihoods destroyed, and so many loved ones killed by that insidious virus – 1.7 m and counting. As one person put it, this isn't a year that any of us are going to be sorry to see the back of; challenging, unpredictable and just plain tough – there's been an awful lot about it not to like.

So at Christmas, in all this mess, where do we look for the hope, the good will, the peace and joy that we usually gather to celebrate at this time? Can we possibly find this sort of Christmas message speaking to us in a credible form right now?

The Gospel we've just heard tells us the ancient Christmas story, and as ever, it holds out a message of hope – and paradoxically, it does so especially in a time of strange and terrible experiences. That's because for us citizens of the *lucky country*, the strange world we've suddenly found ourselves living in over this past year bears remarkable similarities to the world of our Gospel Christmas story.

The world Jesus was born into was also a world where ordinary, innocent people experienced political leaders dividing families and countries by decree, deprivation of liberties, checkpoints; worries about where the next meal might come from. Good health and a reasonable life span were by no means to be expected. The main ones who experience these trials as normal hereabouts are Aboriginal Australians.

But this year, for the first time since WW II, we've all had a personal taste of it.

This may just be a unique opportunity for us to experience how deep is the Christmas message of hope, goodwill, peace and joy that we sing about so blithely. For the first time in my life, Australians generally have freely given up our *lucky country* entitlements. We've given up precious liberties we've taken for granted, and done so for the sake of others we don't even know. We've seen ourselves in the people of the bushfires, drought and floods, in the caregivers and their patients, and we've responded by pulling our heads in. Compassion and generosity have awakened in us as a community. We've seen our leaders embrace a wisdom and unity and generosity of spirit that only a time of general catastrophe inspires.

There are limits to the good we've done. Refugees and foreign students are still left to charities and philanthropic chefs to make sure they don't starve on our watch. But even there, the tide is turning. Good will is stirring in even the coldest hearts.

The baby we celebrate at Christmas is the model for all of us to give up our sense of entitlement for the sake of others. God freely gives up divine power and freedom to embrace our need and our danger. God, born at Bethlehem, chooses illegitimate birth to displaced parents who must depend on the charity of strangers; and all for our sake. Jesus grows to be a model for all of us by sticking to that poverty, to that itinerancy, to that dependency in order that we might inherit

what he gave up for us.

We always talk about needing to become more like Christ. Well this year, a lot of people have done just that. And it's begun to make this country a much better place – a place where we might be poorer, where we might be less self-confident, where we might be less forceful about asserting our rights and privileges, because we're so conscious of others who can't even breathe without help. This has been a year where it's been on show for all to see. So many have given up freedoms, rights and privileges for the sake of others that it's been impossible to miss. In this year and the years to come, I pray that we may cherish this practical experience of what it is that God did in giving up freedom and power to become Earthbound for the sake of Earth. Hope, goodwill, peace, joy; we are wildly rich if we have these! Amen