

## CELEBRATING FROM WITHIN

Another Christmas is upon us, bringing with its inevitable mixture of emotions. It is a sacred and special time of the year, for believers and non-believers alike. Families will make plans to get together on Christmas Day and make contact with those they have not seen for a while due to the Corona Virus. Christmas is a time when we think of family celebrations and gift giving, yet we need to remember that Christmas also belongs to the homeless, the poor, the broken, the destitute, the outcasts and the oppressed. For many, Christmas 2020, will be a time of sadness and despair. It will be a reminder of their own poverty, both materially and spiritually, their loneliness and alienation from relatives, or the loss of a loved one.

However, we still have to experience the busy part of celebrating Christmas. The stores have been bombarding us for weeks with unrelenting advertising. Christmas is not called the 'silly season' without reason. We are expected to 'shop till we drop' for presents, extra food and drink, attend social events and end-of-year activities - the list is endless. We tend to spend more time buying and wrapping presents than we do preparing for the birth of Christ. Money changes hands like it is going out fashion. The Christmas season has become a period when we, the public, play Santa Clause to the shopkeepers!

In the frenzy of commerce, the real message of Christmas – of reconciliation and peace – tends to be left in the shadows of our childhood. As adults, perhaps we should be looking more attentively at the state of the world and asking ourselves which is more important: Christmas presents or Christ's presence? From a commercial aspect, if Christmas did not already exist, it would probably have been invented!

There is no doubt that nostalgia and consumerism have eroded the true meaning of not only Christmas but also other important occasions. Here in Australia, as a society, we're attracted throughout the year to football on Good Friday, the blood, sweat and tears of the Grand Final and the feverish fun of pounding hooves at the Melbourne Cup. In that light, Christmas is just another occasion to party. And while the decorations, sharing of food and drink and the exchanging of gifts are all important parts of our celebrations, they are not nearly as important as the spiritual gifts of love, patience, reconciliation, compassion, forgiveness and generosity. These gifts, which cost nothing stand in sharp contrast to those offered to us through materialism and consumerism. Christ has to become a reality in our lives if we are to find peace.

Christmas is not just about satisfying the retailers or threatening our children to behave themselves if they want to receive stacks of presents. For Christians, the real meaning of Christmas is to celebrate the birth of the Incarnate Infant Jesus, born in an occupied third-world country into poverty and oppression.

As Thomas Merton tells us, Jesus was born in a hay-filled smelly stable far removed from the hub of power and influence and is to this day easily recognized by the marginalized and the poor: 'His peace is with those others for whom there is no room.' And yet gloriously, a star shone over the stable and angels heralded Jesus' birth to the bewildered shepherds by proclaiming to them: 'Glory to God in the highest and peace to all peoples on earth'. If we are to believe the angels, then we too should endeavour to proclaim God's gift of peace to all peoples on earth.

The heroes of that first Christmas were a travel-weary homeless couple expecting their first child. After his birth, the family was forced to flee as refugees to Egypt. It sounds so similar to what many refugee families are still experiencing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whether Christian or not, we have to believe that there is hope for this war-torn, grieving world. There is an answer. It is not to be found in technology, science or power alone, but is simple and has been with us for over two thousand years. To survive in this fragile world, the Christmas story needs to be made relevant once again in people's lives.

Christmas means that the infant Jesus must find a home waiting for him in our hearts, in our families and in the society in which we live. It means we have to look beyond our own comfort zones and become people who are prepared to reach out to do what we can for those who lack even the basic necessities of life.

Christmas has to become a reality in our lives if we are to find peace. Christmas has to be celebrated firstly from within.

A blessed Christmas to all.

Peggy Spencer