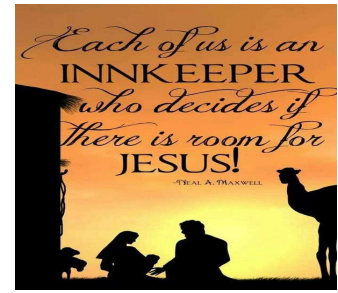


## CELEBRATING FROM WITHIN



Another Christmas is upon us, bringing with it its inevitable and poignant 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 others will make contact with those they have not seen for a while. Christmas is also 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 2022 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 their unrelenting advertising. Christmas is not called the 'silly season' without reason. We are expected to shop till we drop for the presents, extra food and drink, attending social events, 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 as if it were going out of fashion. In many ways, the Christmas season has become a period when we, the public, play Santa Claus to the shopkeepers.

In the frenzy of commerce, the real message of Christmas – reconciliation and peace - tends to be left in the long-ago 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 Christmas. 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 the pounding hooves at the Melbourne Cup. In that light, it is just another occasion to party.

And while the decorations, the 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. Christmas has to be celebrated from the within. 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, not in a blaze of glory but in an occupied third world country into poverty and oppression. His bed was a hay-filled crib in a smelly stable.

The heroes of that first Christmas were a travel-weary homeless couple expecting their first child. After his birth, the family was then 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.

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Here in Australia, we have so much for which to be grateful. We live in a civilised country. We enjoy freedom of speech, democracy and religion. We do have our own set of problems but we also have many wonderful people and organisations who work tirelessly to tackle them.

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 really 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.

The moral of the Christmas story is that unless we can experience the real spirit of Christmas – remembering all those who do not enjoy what we are able to enjoy – there is no real Christmas. There will only be tinsel and lights and so much empty, outward show.

Peggy Spencer

Christmas 2022

