

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
ADVENT SERVICE OF READINGS AND SONG
SUNDAY 18 DECEMBER 2011
Mr Robert Sanderson**



“Christmas is for Everyone”

Well, what a wonderful journey of words and music we have been on this morning.

We have heard some words from Exodus and the first grouping of texts in Isaiah. We have heard some readings from the two gospel writers who speak about the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

When reading the Hebrew texts and the gospels, we must always remember that what we have received reflects the thoughts and the stories of the writers who wanted to describe their understanding of, and relationship to, God. Just as the writers cannot be separated from their writings, the writers cannot be separated from their environment, their time and their community. They were talking to their fellows about what concerned them; about what Jesus meant to them.

Marcus Borg describes it this way. “... the Jewish Bible is not God’s story of Israel, but *Israel’s story of Israel*. The gospels are not God’s story of Jesus, but *early Christianity’s story of Jesus*.” (Borg, M.J., *Jesus*, 2006, p24)

This makes a great difference. When we read a novel by Jane Austen or Charles Dickens, we don’t balk at the fact that it is nineteenth century language describing nineteenth century people in a nineteenth century world. We accept that for what it is and place ourselves in the world of the novel. Only then can we come to feel and understand what the author is saying. This neither prevents us from analyzing the text, nor from interpreting it. I am not for one minute likening good nineteenth century novels to our sacred texts except for the *realities of the written word*.

The same thing applies to the text of the hymns and carols we have heard. Our first hymn (“O come, O come, Emmanuel”) is based on a ninth century Latin Antiphon. This was expanded in the eighteenth century basically into the hymn we have today. It was translated into the poetry of the nineteenth century, and even that was ‘altered’ by the compilers of *Together in Song* in 1999. The wonderful music we have heard this morning has a long history too, it spans 500 years.

When we take a longitudinal view of stories and ideas, we find that these change and develop under the impact of time and place and culture.

We have spoken earlier about St. Nicholas. Little of his life is independently corroborated other than that he lived in the fourth century, probably attended the Council of Nicaea in the reign of the emperor Constantine and became Bishop of Myra. One thing that clearly stands out in his *legendary life* is that he was a most compassionate and generous man who went out of his way to help others. He was extremely popular in the Eastern and Western Church and churches dedicated to him sprang up from England in the west to Russia in the east.

He was much portrayed by artists, artisans and playwrights as you will see in the picture of the window from Chartres Cathedral.

After the Reformation, Nicholas was forgotten in Protestant churches everywhere except in Holland

where he was known as *Sinterklaas*. This 'Santa Claus' was combined with an old Nordic story to become an old man who would punish naughty children and reward good children with gifts. Seventeenth century Dutch colonists took the tradition to New Amsterdam which later became New York. In the nineteenth century, Santa Claus and the tradition of Christmas gift-giving swept America. In the mid-nineteenth century in England, 'Father Christmas', as he is known there and the Christmas tree were introduced from Europe by Prince Albert, the consort of Queen Victoria.

After this long tradition, what do we have today?

Certainly not the St. Nicholas legend about a caring person who only wanted to help others. Nor the Santa Claus who would bring joy and reward children for their good behavior.

No! Our modern-day 'Santa' is more interested in *receiving* than in *giving*. "What do you want for Christmas, young man?" "I want the latest *X-box*." Says the boy as his mother shakes her head furiously from side to side and goes pale at the thought of a \$400 gift. This often leads to parents feeling guilty if they cannot afford what their child wants. We all know the stories of people who have overspent at Christmas and spent the rest of the year paying for it. It really is wrong-headed thinking. To go down this path is to believe that the cost of a gift is a measure of one's love!

Santa is firmly entrenched in the frontline of marketing to children and middle class aspirations. Is this a case of the true spirit of Christmas being swallowed up in the swipe of a credit card?

Mind you, it is not only the stores and shopping malls that have appropriated Santa for their use. Did you know that Norway and Finland are engaged in a turf war at the present time. Finland has declared one of their towns the home of Santa Claus to attract the tourist trade. Norway is taking them to court because everyone knows that Santa Claus lives in Norway. He has his factory in Drøbak. He even has his Post Office there where he answers letters to children from all over the world.

In 1954 the great American-English Poet T. S. Eliot started his poem *The cultivation of Christmas trees* this way.

There are several attitudes towards Christmas
Some of which we may disregard:
The social, the torpid, the patently commercial,
The rowdy (the pubs being open till midnight),
And the childish – which is not that of the child
For whom the candle is a star, and the gilded angel
Spreading its wings at the summit of the tree
Is not only a decoration but an angel. (Eliot, T.S., *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, 1963
p117)

Eliot wants us to ask ourselves about the real meaning of Christmas. When he asks us to disregard the social I suggest he means that a Christmas function which is no more than a get-together has nothing specifically to do with Christmas. The attitude, 'any excuse for a party' cannot apply to Christmas. In Australia, Christmas is often the time when many families take their annual holidays as this coincides with mid-summer and the end of the school year. And, despite the fact that one of our major stores commenced their 'back-to-school' advertising push on the day the students broke up, this remains an important family time.

What, then, is the spirit of Christmas? A pretty good starting point would be to read Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. If you can abide the sentimentality in this work, why not read it again and see how

relevant its underlying message is today. It certainly had a big impact during his lifetime. When Dickens died in 1870 a young girl exclaimed, "Then will Father Christmas die too?"

If you ask people, "What makes Christmas Christmas?", most will say *joy* and I would agree with that. Many of the readings we have heard have contained much joy. The reading from Isaiah speaks of the King who will come and rule with justice and peace (Isaiah 9: 2, 6, 7). We too can identify with this in our world. Have you not said to yourself, "If only we could have peace and justice in the world." This is one of the universal cries of humanity. Remember our discussion at the beginning? This is not a prediction of the coming of Jesus. It is from the story of Israel. So it is not surprising that Matthew, a Jew like all the gospel writers, should shout out when Jesus came, "This is what we have been waiting for. *He is here!*"

Another example is when Joseph has a dream and the angel tells him that the child is from God (Matthew 1: 18 – 23). Matthew quotes the Hebrew text Isaiah 7: 14 which is about God giving a sign to the people (Isaiah 7: 10 – 17). Matthew uses this story to great effect in his telling of the story. Don't worry about the fact that the gospel says a 'virgin' will conceive whereas the Hebrew says 'young woman'. It is Matthew's way of adding excitement to the story. He elaborates on the story to make the point as all great storytellers do. Add a drop of verisimilitude and a pinch of magic and Wow! What a story we have. He is not interested in the detail. He's building up the picture. The real thing that he wants is the other bit – the ending, the climax. "This is Emmanuel, *God is with us!*"

Why have we become so staid; so 'religious'? (By that I mean so tied to form and tradition.) And, yes, so *bored* with these wonderful gospel stories that they no longer thrill us when we hear them. We need more storytellers in the church so that we can hear these stories as if for the first time. Many have said this but how many are listening?

Can we feel the joy of the gospel? Luke was infatuated with joy. He produces three of the most wonderful songs of Christianity and they are all in his account of the birth story. Mary's song of praise, "My soul magnifies the Lord" known by its Latin name the *Magnificat* (Luke 1: 46-55). Zechariah's song of praise "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel" known as the *Benedictus* (Luke 1: 68-79). Simeon's song of praise, "Lord now let your servant go in peace" known as the *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2: 29-32) which we heard sung earlier.

I suspect that one of the problems today is that we seem to have lost the meaning of 'joy'. These days the fashion seems to be for seeking 'happiness'. Being 'happy' is a feeling of pleasurable satisfaction with one's circumstances or achievements. Some seek happiness in possessions or making money or thrill-seeking. There is even a great debate going on at the present time as to whether periods of unhappiness in children is a sickness and should be treated with long-term drug therapy. I must say that it is not my place to criticize what makes people happy but I do wonder if they find it enough.

On the other hand, 'joy' is the pleasurable emotion due to well-being; an exultation of the spirit. And that is very different. Where does joy come from? After all, it is an emotion, a response to well-being. It is a great lifting of the spirit. What is its source? What actually improves our well-being? Exactly what lifts the spirit? My answer to all these questions is *love*. There is nothing that buoys the spirit more than love because love is about *relationship*. Love involves the interaction between people for their mutual benefit and that is expressed as *joy*.

This is the real message of the Christmas story. God comes into our lives. God *continually* comes into our lives and when we return that love we are able to see God in others. And that demands action. This is what it is all about. This is the *real spirit of Christmas*.

“Christmas is for everyone.” Yes! It is. If you are down and out or at the end of your tether, share your love around where you can. Offer it to those who are like you; those who are willing to help you; those who shun you; those who have much; those who need you...

“Christmas is for everyone.” Yes! It is. If you have a comfortable life, share your love around where you can. Offer it to those who are lonely or depressed; those who are particularly unhappy because they are separated from family and loved ones; those who are sick in mind or body or spirit; those who are homeless or have lost their jobs...

“Christmas is for everyone.” Yes! It is. If you are not a Christian, share your love and compassion around where you can, because this is at the heart of your faith too. And if you have no faith, you also know the inherent wisdom of loving one another.

We started our service with the hymn “O come, O come, Emmanuel”. I have not found a hymnbook that has more than five verses – the original Latin has seven. Here is the seventh that echoes the yearning of all humanity:

*O come, Desire of nations, bind
in one the hearts of humankind,
Bid thou our sad divisions cease,
and be thyself our King of Peace.*

AMEN

Graphic: *Installation of Nicholas as Bishop of Myra* 13th cent.
Detail from a stained glass window, Chartres Cathedral
(Photograph: ©Stuart Whatling reproduced according to required permissions)