

Christmas '18

- Since I have been a young boy, our family has holidayed in Bright & we enjoyed going to secluded places to swim in the Ovens or Buckland Rivers, but every year we are finding that all of our secluded, swimming holes sacred to us, have been overtaken.
- Residents in rural areas can feel violated when mountain bikes charge up & down their bush valley of solitude, tearing up the countryside without care for the environment.
- My friend has been the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral for the last several years, & he constantly has problems with tourists who have no respect for the sacred place that the Cathedral is to us because often many come in, at best, admiring what is arguably one of the most beautiful neo-gothic buildings in the world & they treat it like a market-place.
- We can feel violated, or at least what we hold sacred, being abused, when people move into our sacred space in what we may regard a disrespectful way.
- It is natural to feel annoyed when people intrude on your sacred places.
- So it is natural for Christians to complain that the feast of Christmas has been trivialised & cheapened by being co-opted in secular society; certainly the deeper Christian meaning of the Christmas story has been lost in popular translation.
- The wonder of the image of the baby laid in the cattle shelter to the sound of angels, & the summoning of shepherds derives from the significance of the birth of a wondrous child - This is not just any baby, but the child who shall grow to set the people free, the Son of God making a home among his people & becoming one in solidarity with the least in that society.
- In Christian devotion the wonder of Christmas has always focused on the paradoxes entailed in a God who is outside of place, unimaginable, all powerful & self-sufficient being localised in a vulnerable baby born in a mean place, & needing love to live & grow - God's incomprehensible love becomes tangible.
- Christmas is a mystery that leads to silence.
- This aspect of Christmas is certainly lost in its secular celebration.
- Father Christmas on his reindeer sled, the transactions involved in cards, presents, food & drink, noisy music in shopping centres, add colour to the season, but lack the depth & transcendence of the Christian story.
- From another perspective, however, the Christian story of Jesus' birth points to the value of the secular Christmas & to its unrealised possibilities.
- The point of the involvement of God in the minute details of human life is to assert the value of the human world in all its relationships.
- Nothing loved by God is without value. No baby is just a baby.
- This means that the customs & practices of our Australian Christmas should not be dismissed simply as a corrupted & so inferior version of the Christian celebration - they should be appreciated in their own right.

- To get in touch with people at Christmas, even through online cards, to gather with the extended family, to take time off work, to soften for an hour or so the hard edges of workplace relationships & to donate to charities, all embody the good human values that are affirmed & grounded in the story of Jesus' birth.
- Of course these customs can be purely token or superficial, Christmas smiles can be fake; well-wishing can conceal wishing someone bad luck; instead of reconciling families, gatherings can further entrench hostilities; celebratory eating & drinking can degenerate into binging.
- That, of course, can also happen in Christian families.
- When it comes to celebrations we are all secular.
- The Christian story, however, has a depth that challenges all our practices.
- In it God's coming among us takes place in solidarity with the most hassled kinds of people: a heavily pregnant woman compelled to travel for tax purposes, a couple homeless when the baby is due, people sleeping out in the fields, ostracised shepherds, & refugees forced to flee for their lives.
- The celebration of Christmas encourages all people of good will, whatever our religious beliefs, to walk for a time in solidarity with people at the bottom of the pile, to take time to dream of what we are invited to be, & to reflect on what kind of a society we want & strive for it together.
- The inn with no room, the people in the parks, the threat of Herod, the disreputable shepherds, the refugees in Egypt & the rumour of angels are the characters in the Christmas story – all these are found in our personal & public stories today AND they make a claim on us all the year round.
- Christmas is also about the invitation to receive the gift – the God who can make sense of our humanity, who can make sense of our lives in the face of the uncertainty & anguish.
- The Christmas story is real & powerful – of God's great love for each of us & the empowerment we are given to love as God loves us, giving us the power to change our world & its people when we are in relationship with the God who befriends & empowers us in Jesus.
- Could it be that the love we deeply long for at Christmas, the love we have never known with any certainty, is the love & care on Earth that might exist between us all: the courageous love for each other & the ecosystem, for beauty & nature, for peace & innocence ... Love above & beyond power & money - the love & grace that make the world more welcoming, beautiful & liveable; the love that makes us all less lonely; the love that doesn't need a superhero, but intimate friendship with God himself, born of a human woman in the mess & mystery of human life.
- My invitation to you this Christmas is to make space in your life for Jesus, to come & celebrate & remember his presence in your life more regularly at the Sunday Eucharist – **we** can deepen the meaning of Christmas for others.
- May God bless each of you & your families on this Christmas day & every day of your lives.