

2019 Christmas Messages from Leaders of Christian Churches in Australia

Looking at the Nativity scene this year, I am mindful of Julian of Norwich's insight from the vivid revelations of the divine love, which she received as a gift.

"The love in which God made us was in God from without beginning", wrote Julian in 1373.

The eternal love of God then so fully embraces our humanity in the particularity of the Incarnation: at Bethlehem amidst the angels, the shepherds and the wise ones from the East.

God's loving choice, then as now, is to be humbly present: intimate, courteous, giving us delight and assurance. As Julian conveys; so homely, so friendly, so lacking in pretence.

This is our God with us, our Emmanuel, who welcomes us in Jesus glorious and fair divinity.

In response to, as Julian conveys, "our fair bright, blessed Lord", we might ponder afresh at Christmas the condition of our heart's generosity.

For, as Jesus says, "From the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45).

Especially, at this crucial time when we know the human family simply must become a more benign and loving presence on this planet.

It is a time for generous hearts.

*Bishop Philip Huggins, President
National Council of Churches in Australia*

(NB. In the Western Church, Christmas is celebrated on 25 December 2018.
Most Orthodox Churches will celebrate the Feast of the Nativity on 7 January 2019.)

15 messages follow.

For more information, contact the NCCA Secretariat on 8259 0800.

Anglican Church of Australia

Ordinary and extraordinary are two words that could both describe Jesus' birth. They seem like opposites, yet come together in the birth of the Messiah in a remarkable way. Ordinary, because we've all come into the world in this way. It doesn't matter who we are or what we will become – this same beginning is shared by all. Extraordinary, because this act of God's vulnerability is unprecedented in human history before or since. God was showing through the birth of his son that everything was risked, with the benefits only accruing to people like us.

'People like us' were certainly there at the time. Faithful Mary and Joseph, raging Herod, marvelling shepherds, the persistent sages from the East. All of them share something in common with us too. At our best and at our worst, the gift of Christmas is present for us in our time as much as theirs. Risking all and changing everything about what it means for us to have a life renewed in Christ is God's gift to us then and now.

If you are tired of the ordinary, make your Christmas a little more extraordinary this year. Reflect on what the Father of all Creation was doing through the birth of Jesus, enter the mystery of his life at a service of Christmas worship. Sing some Christmas carols with your friends and family, go to the core of the gift in another pair of related opposites, which is the simplicity and awesomeness of what God has given us.

Have a blessed Christmas.

*The Most Reverend Dr Philip L. Freier, Primate,
Anglican Church of Australia*

Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

The Nativity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in the flesh opened again the gates of Paradise. The Light of the world came to the world He created, to make those who believe in Him citizens of the Kingdom that is to come.

On the day of the Nativity, our Lord willingly condescends, taking upon Himself the flesh of His creation. As St John of Damascus writes, the Lord Jesus Christ "clothed Himself in creation without weakening or departing from his Divinity, that He might raise our nature in glory and make us partakers of his Divine Nature". Such is the majesty, glory and mercy of the Lord's condescension at his Nativity that the Angels are heard saying "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." (Luke 2: 14). Indeed, the Lord God's nativity is the beginning of our restoration to Him. At His Nativity, we receive as gifts His Glory, His Peace and His Goodwill.

By Glory, man is called to glorify and worship the One True God Who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. By Goodwill, true Christians are called to dispense the Will of God, in His Truth, through faith and deeds of mercy and righteousness in this life. In dispensing His Goodwill, man receives the grace of the Lord's peace and finds oneself on the path of salvation and reconciliation with the Creator, which is made possible to man by the Nativity and through the Glorious Third-Day Resurrection.

On this Holy Feast, I wish you all a merry Christmas and pray that you may abide in His Love, Mercy and Truth.

*His Eminence Metropolitan Basilios, Archbishop
Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines*

Catholic Church in Australia

In Australia and around the world there is an air of uncertainty and anxiety as we move to the end of this year. The preference for death over life in many forms; political instability and the travails of democracy; the rise of populist and nationalist ideologies which build walls not bridges; the inhuman treatment of migrants and refugees at a time of vast movement of peoples around the globe; the lack of will to move on climate change which brings droughts and fires here but floods elsewhere. All this and more shows how shadowed the planet is at this time.

Christmas always takes us into the shadows. It is for “those who live in darkness and the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79). It takes us there because Christmas knows the truth spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone” (9:14). Only at the heart of darkness is the light born, the light of the child which “the darkness has not overcome” (John 1:5). That is why Easter is the key to Christmas.

In Europe the feast of Christ’s birth replaced the pagan celebration of the *sol invictus*, the unconquered sun. At the winter solstice, the pagan feast celebrated the triumph of light over darkness; and Christianity baptised the pagan celebration because, with the eye of faith, it saw the birth of Jesus as that kind of triumph, foreshadowing the victory of Easter.

To the newborn child, then, we bring not gold, frankincense or myrrh but the gifts of our faith and the hope to which it gives birth and the joy to which hope gives birth. The star leads us to the light, and at his feet we lay what we bring. The God who becomes one of us is delighted by our gifts and gives us forever the gift of the Word-made-flesh.

*The Most Reverend Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Brisbane,
President, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
Catholic Church in Australia*

Chinese Methodist Church in Australia

The hope that Christmas brings

Hope is about feeling -- specifically, feeling about the future that is bright, positive and desirable. As such, hope carries one forward with the optimism that their life situation will improve.

The Christian faith speaks to the hope of everyone’s heart in the person of Jesus Christ. This is more than just ‘wishful thinking’. For, before Jesus was born, an angel revealed to his father, Joseph:

“All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet:

“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”-- which means, “God with us.” (Matthew 1:22-23)

The Four Gospels capture how fallen humanity begins to experience hope -- how real, how gracious and how precious -- in Immanuel, God with us. Let me cite 3 ways the hope of Immanuel is manifested:

1. Lives in crisis experience Immanuel. Jesus performed his first miracle at Cana, when a wedding celebration ran out of wine. So Jesus the Immanuel turned water into wine.
2. A life of failure experiences Immanuel. Once, Peter fished the whole night but caught nothing. Jesus came to him at dawn and told him to put the boat out to deep water and let down the nets. Peter obeyed and caught a boatful.
3. The world of sin experiences Immanuel. Immanuel comes into our broken world to stand in solidarity with us sinners, so as to reconcile us to him.

May this Christmas set you off to experience the hope of Jesus the Immanuel, God with us.

*Rev Dr Albert Wong, Bishop
Chinese Methodist Church in Australia*

Churches of Christ in Australia

In many ways there is a stark contrast between the reality of life, the pressures people face and the message of Christmas.

We have seen, and continue to reflect on, the impact of drought and bushfire for many people. The images in the media are hard to comprehend. Many struggle to find meaningful employment, our climate is unpredictable, it seems so difficult to treat people who seek asylum with compassion and we have what seems to be an increasingly argumentative environment in political leadership. Internationally unpredictability in country leadership decision making is becoming the new norm.

Mary's song in Luke paints a different picture. Her words are full of hope. God will show mercy, scatter the proud, will bring down the powerful, lift the lowly, feed the hungry and bless all people. How will this happen? It comes to pass through the birth of Jesus – the Messiah.

We celebrate, in the stories of Christmas, this coming of a new Kingdom of justice and peace. The values of which are sacrificial love, generous forgiveness and abundant grace. In this Kingdom the hungry are fed, the naked clothed, the sick are visited and the thirsty can drink. The symbol of this new Kingdom is the vulnerable baby cradled in a manger and celebrated by the hosts of heaven.

This is the birth of hope, and this hope is real for us today. Such an abundant hope provides us with energy, peace and new life no matter what we may face.

May the gift of hope this Christmas be real to each one and may our community increasingly reflect the values of God's kingdom.

*Rev John Gilmore,
Churches of Christ in Australia*

The Congregational Federation of Australia and New Zealand

God's gift of Jesus at Christmas is a gift of hope. After all, what can a newborn baby do? But what might a newborn baby do? On the other hand, what might a new born baby not do? It's all in the future – and that tiny child has the potential for anything.

Jesus, the helpless child in the manger born of a poor family who would soon leave their homeland as refugees, would one day change the world. It's not just the obvious - the churches dedicated to him, it's the Christian principles at the very foundations of our society which assumes fairness for all, help for those in need and comfort for the distressed:

I pray that Christmas gives all those who are struggling a chance to pause and simply enjoy the moment. I pray that the celebration of Christ's birth shines through the darkness of their recent months as a reminder that there is hope.

For all of us, may Christ's blessings give us joy.

*Ms Miriama Laumea, Moderator
The Congregational Federation of Australia and New Zealand*

Coptic Orthodox Church

Diocese of Sydney and Affiliated Regions

MESSAGE OF THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY 2019

We rejoice in the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who has manifested to us the mystery of God's humility and love and He constantly seeks our salvation.

When we joyfully come to worship the babe of Bethlehem, let us remember that we are worshipping our Lord, who emptied Himself and accepted to take our human nature. He came to our world and lived amongst us so He can save us; we who were sitting in darkness and the shadow of death. He shone upon us with His light, as it is written, "*The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.*" (Matthew 4:16).

We pray for the peace of the world. We pray for our country Australia and particularly for the drought stricken farmers and those who suffered in the recent bush fires.

May Emmanuel our Lord, born in Bethlehem, fill us with His peace.

Bishop Daniel

Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church -Diocese of Sydney & Affiliated Regions

Coptic Orthodox Church

Diocese of Melbourne and Affiliated Regions

The greatest joy we received through the nativity scene is that of the lord of lords and king of kings born in a manger whilst he could have been born in the biggest mansion in the world.

Instead of being in the presence of the media and the renowned world leaders, he chose to be amongst the shepherds, the wise men, Joseph, Mary the animals and the angels.

The choice that God made to be born in a manger tells us the spirit of this event, the spirit of humility, sacrifice and simplicity. Then we received the fullness of the word Immanuel (God is with us)

"Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" Isaiah 7:14

The same name given in Matthew 1:23 more than 700 years later. Isaiah, named by the fathers as the writer of the 5th gospel, could anticipate this great event. The word Immanuel now describes the relationship of God with man in the New Testament. God is with us, best describes the message of the manger. As the angels attended this amazing event and all they could utter were the words

"Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and goodwill toward men" Luke 2:14.

This is the gift to humanity, the gift of peace and goodwill. The exciting plan God has for the salvation of mankind is now fully revealed and is due of praise, eternal gratitude and life of thankfulness.

Fr Abanoub Atalla

Coptic Orthodox Church -Diocese of Melbourne & Affiliated Regions

Greek Orthodox Church of Australia

“Today heaven and the earth have been united with the birth of Christ”

(Idiomelon from the Vespers’ Litany of Christmas)

With these words, sung on the eve of Christmas in all Orthodox Churches around the world, we proclaim the astounding beauty and profound mystery of Christmas—the birth, in the flesh, of the heavenly and eternal Son of God. Indeed, these words powerfully reveal the marvellous wonder of Christmas; a joy-filled event in which the wall of partition dividing heaven and earth is torn down, once and for all, thereby opening up God’s enduring presence within the world. Indeed, what is unveiled before us, with the birth of Christ, is the fulfilment of God’s pre-eternal purpose and eschatological destiny to be united with the world, bestowing, in this way, upon humanity, the possibility of becoming ‘gods’ by grace (2Pt 1:4).

Reflecting a little further, this ‘strange paradox’ of God becoming human is not an event which only concerned the past, but is significant for the present, and indeed for the future of the world. It is for this reason, that we also sing, “Christ is born, glorify Him—Χριστός γεννᾶται δοξάσατε—and not Christ was born some 2000 years ago, since, by the birth of the *Theanthropos*, the whole of created human nature, spanning from the creation of the world in the beginning, all the way into the future, is now given the means to be taken out of the narrow and death-begetting boundaries of isolation, so as to be inspired with the optimism of unity, by grace, with God. It is this unprecedented joy of God who is now Emmanuel, that is, God with us— and indeed forever with us—that the universal feast of Christmas invites all faithful to experience.

With this unprecedented gift of life—indeed, eternal life in and with Christ—may we give birth to Christ personally in our hearts, and in our lives, and in so doing, let us behold, once again the world with love and trust, with patience and tolerance empowered by the message that Christ “was born for our salvation, a newborn Child, the pre-eternal God.”

*Archbishop Makarios, Primate
Greek Orthodox Church of Australia*

Lutheran Church of Australia

Christmas Eve: it could be our most stressful day of the year. We have one eye on the clock ticking down, the other on the credit-card balance clocking up. Preparing for Christmas should be a happy time, but seasonal demands and expectations cause many people anxiety and depression.

Christmas is indeed a time for families, gift-giving and parties, but that is only part of the story. The greater part is the free gift of life, love, and forgiveness. This is the very heart of Christmas, whatever our personal or family circumstances.

Quite simply, Christmas is the best ‘good news’ story. We are forgiven, and we are loved. In a world of death we have life. God reaches into our world to do what we cannot do for ourselves. We are new people with a new hope and a new reason for living. It comes within, in our hearts, in a child of promise who quite simply changes everything – all our hopes, and everything we live for.

One of his names is ‘Immanuel’, which translates as ‘God is with us’. In Jesus our God knows us inside out, our deepest desires and needs. God chooses, voluntarily, to identify with us, suffer with us, and even die like us. This is the uniquely Christian belief in the God who loves us. It’s what faith and the Bible are really all about.

Even today, despite our doubts, anxieties and fears, God has not abandoned us or the world. When we suffer, God suffers. When we rejoice, God rejoices. When we need love, God loves us.

When we need saving, God saves us. This is the most wonderful Christmas gift of Jesus, who is love come to life.

*Rev John Henderson, Bishop
Lutheran Church of Australia*

Religious Society of Friends in Australia (Quakers)

The Christmas story and message have held different meanings for me across the years. As a young child I enjoyed those carols which told different parts of the story—an angel visiting Mary during her pregnancy, the birth of Jesus in the stable, the shepherds, and the wise men.

Singing in a school choir, church choir and now a community choir, I have learned more carols, from different countries and reflecting different traditions: carols which capture something deeper. Christina Rossetti wrote a poem in her diary in 1885. Over the years it has been set to music by many composers. This beautiful carol is now not often sung.

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine,
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
Love Incarnate, Love Divine,
Worship we our Jesus,
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign

This year, as I reflect on our world and the challenges we face, this carol has become a prayer. How might we make Love our token?

*Ann Zubrick, Presiding Clerk,
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia*

The Salvation Army

It's a privilege to greet you this Christmas. For so many people Christmas time only accentuates their sense of lostness - of being alone in the crowd. The emphasis on family, happy memories, celebration and giving just reminds them of their isolation and that life has not been like that for them.

Perhaps that is why The Salvation Army, along with so many other churches, make Christmas a major focus of their year. Perhaps that is why we arrange special meals in the community, assistance and the giving of toys and hampers. We want to replace the sense of loss or meet the urgent need and display the spirit of Christmas in the most practical way.

Yet despite all we do, we cannot fix broken lives or heal the deep wounds of the heart. Sometimes we are surprised to discover that the people who feel most lost in this Christmas maze are not the economically strapped. Sometimes the hurting, broken, lonely and lost are the ones who appear to have it all together.

It is so important that we don't get carried away with nostalgia when it comes to the Christmas story. We can romanticize the scene of Jesus' birth and miss the power of its message. God took on

human flesh - no longer distant and unreachable - he moved into our neighbourhood and spent his life in search of those who needed to reconnect with their Maker.

Christmas is about the coming of the Saviour of the world - the loving Saviour - the one who searches out lost people, embraces them, and gives them the best sense of belonging they could ever imagine. He is our Mighty God for whom nothing is impossible.

"And she will have a Son and you shall name him Jesus (meaning 'Saviour'), for he will save his people from their sins." Matthew 1:21 (TLB) - "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift." 2 Corinthians 9:15 (NIV)

So, this Christmas, let us trust God, rely on his power, live in relationship with him and partner with him to bring life, light and hope to our world.

May God bless you.

*Commissioners Janine and Robert Donaldson, Territorial Leaders
The Salvation Army, Australia*

Uniting Church in Australia

"Peace be with you on behalf of the Uniting Church in Australia"

At Christmas we celebrate God's gift of love and peace to our world through the coming of Jesus. Jesus shows us that God cares about our life as human beings, our joys and suffering. In Jesus we see the deep love of God for us and for the whole of creation.

Over the past year, children and young people have led us in expressing their concern for the life of our earth. They are calling for all of us to work together to respond to the environmental devastation that is having tragic consequences in many parts of our world.

All of creation is interdependent. We are part of an intricate web of life. Across the world we are interconnected – through our multicultural, intergenerational communities, through social media, travel, economic developments and internal and external conflicts.

Jesus calls us to be agents of the love and peace that he embodies. We are invited to compassionately work for the flourishing of all people, and for the life of our earth. We remember this Christmas that Jesus has come for the healing and renewal of the whole creation.

God's gifts to us are love, peace, joy and hope for the whole world. We receive these gifts and are invited to freely share these gifts with others.

What will be the gifts you offer to our world this Christmas?

Expressing hospitality and welcome through inviting others to join you for a meal or in a worship celebration.

Supporting people in communities impacted by drought and bushfire?

Joining with our Pacific neighbours in addressing climate change and committing to personal and community actions that reflect our care and advocacy for the life of our planet and all its creatures?

May God bless you with hope and love this Christmas. Together may we be part of the processes of healing and renewal that Christ is bringing to our world.

*Dr Deidre Palmer, President
Uniting Church in Australia Assembly*

Australian Christian Churches - ACC

GOD'S RESPONSE TO OUR CHALLENGES

As the year draws to a close, reminders of Christmas are all across our communities. It's a time of great celebration, but for some people across our country, it may be hard to celebrate because 2019 has been so very difficult.

Severe drought is biting hard in many regions, and with that, comes incredible pain and hardship.

Devastating bushfires have done so much damage to people and properties in recent months. Unemployment has been a heavy weight on a lot of Australians; and added to that is the very painful personal life experiences many people have had to navigate.

The big question is, what's God's response to our human condition with all its challenges?

It's what and who we celebrate at Christmas: God's Son, who is called Emmanuel.

We can read about how it was announced in the New Testament. "Listen! A virgin will be pregnant, she will give birth to a Son, and he will be known as 'Emmanuel', which means in Hebrew, 'God became one of us'." (Matthew 1:23 TPT)

He did not come as an angel, nor as a fully formed, perfect adult – He came as a vulnerable baby. He wasn't born in a palace, but a stable. He experienced every human emotion and situation. This is why the Bible tells us that He can empathise with and relate to us in all our challenges.

No matter how life is treating us, it is reassuring to know that there is a God who understands and loves us. He is with us.

As we go into this Christmas season, let's be strengthened knowing God is with us, and perhaps take a moment to pray for and bless those who are doing it tough in the spirit of Emmanuel – God with us.

*Wayne Alcorn, ACC National President
Australian Christian Churches- ACC*

Australian Baptist Ministries

Christmas Celebrations.

Christmas is a time of family reunion and celebration for many people. This year this will be powerfully true for Timothy Weeks' family in Wagga Wagga. Freed Taliban hostage Timothy Weeks says he never gave up hope during his "long and tortuous" captivity in Afghanistan for the last three years.

Speaking in public for the first time since his release almost two weeks ago, Mr Weeks expressed his heartfelt thanks to those people who secured his freedom. He said: "At times I felt as if my death was imminent and that I would never return to see those that I love again but by the will of God I am here, I am alive and I am safe and I am free. There is nothing else in the world that I need."

While we rejoice with the Weeks family, for many others this Christmas will not be so full of hope. Many continue to be on high alert as the bushfire season continues unabated. Others are starting the long process of restoring what has already been decimated by the fires. Drought continues to rob many people of their livelihoods as it cuts its way through so much of our country. While others find it hard to enter into Christmas celebrations as they struggle with financial stress, chronic illness and indifference to their suffering.

But, at its deepest level, **Christmas is about celebration**. It is the celebration of the birth of Jesus. At its heart is the conviction that God has chosen, through Jesus' birth and subsequent death, to join

with us in all the dislocation, disasters and distress of our life. It is the promise that no matter what situations we face in our lives we are never alone, nor is our journey ever meaningless or unaccompanied. **Christmas is the declaration that God is with us.** Paul, the apostle, offers this blessing for us all, 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.' Romans 15:13

*Rev Keith Jobberns, National Ministries Director
Australian Baptist Ministries*
