



CHRISTMAS – AN EMERGENCY ENTRY INTO OUR LIVES

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be worthy in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I hope that Christmas is going to be a time of joy and blessing for you and your loved ones. In expressing that hope, I ask you to ponder what Christmas means for you. More importantly, what THIS Christmas will mean for you.

In the fourth year of her long reign, Queen Victoria wrote in her diary on Christmas Eve 1841:¹

Christmas, I always look upon as a most dear happy time ... It is a pleasure to have this blessed festival associated with one's happiest days. The very smell of Christmas trees of pleasant memories.

Indeed, it should be noted that it was Queen Victoria and Prince Albert who led to the popularising of the Christmas Tree tradition in the English-speaking world. And from this exploded all the glitter of our annual Christmas celebrations ... a celebration of our happiest day.

But beyond the glitter, what does Christmas actually mean for you? What does it mean for you not just in general terms but what does it mean for you this year in particular?

We have the generic statements which we will all say at this time such as:

- Emanuel, God with us
- Peace on earth and Goodwill to all

¹ Cited by W David O Taylor, *Why putting Christ back in Christmas is not enough*, in *Christianity Today*, 17 Dec 2018.

- Joy to the World

We have said them Christmas after Christmas. But let's personalise it beyond such collective, generalised statements. So, when I ask what does Christmas mean for you, I am actually asking what will THIS Christmas mean for each of us, and not the collective us, but each of us individually.

For me this Christmas will be the first time in seventy-five years when my mother will not have been a part of it one way or another. But it will also be a time when all of our children and grand-children have come together remembering their grandmother and ouma and celebrating our family over which she presided throughout their lives to date. It is already proving a time of sweet poignancy for us as a family – a time of aching and joying.

I can't know the circumstance of each and every one of you, though I do know many of you have traversed difficult times over the past months and year; whatever the case, I wish that this Christmas, the Christmas of 2024, may be a time of special blessing and joy for you and your loved ones. In other words that this Christmas may prove to be a gift to your lives, reaching into whatever pain or difficult path you may have encountered.

Christmas is, of course, about giving... retail sales booming prove the point. But we should not lose sight that each Christmas is itself a potential gift to every one of us quite beyond the tinsel and wrapped gifts we are about to give each other. Each new Christmas, through remembrance of why it is so special an occasion, offers us the opportunity to seek some divine touch upon the pain and hurt that may have been in our lives.

The writer Nikos Kazantzakis gave a copy of his book 'Greek Passion' to Albert Einstein writing in his covering letter:

I urge you to read it. (the book's original) title is 'Christ is still being crucified' incorrectly translated as 'Greek Passion' ... in it I have tried to enliven man's attempt to find a *Notausgang* (emergency exit in English) to the despair and injustice which encircle and suffocate us.

Apart from the fact that Kazantzakis was an atheist, what has stood out to me from this letter was his concept of *Notausgang* (emergency exit) which suggests the idea of there being some 'emergency contact point' between the divine and humanity. The idea that such a contact point provides an escape from earthly cycle of despair in which humanity so often feels itself trapped. By his words Kazantzakis was suggesting that the crucifixion was not simply an historic event but, in all its complexity, a concept of continuous relevance – this is profound; but I want to revert not to the end of Christ's incarnation amongst us but to the beginning – his birth. For surely it too not only was but is an 'emergency contact point' in our existence.

Each Christmas we revere the cradle in the manger, we carol the birth of Christ amongst us, we commemorate key events such as wondrous shepherds and wise sages from the East; but do we really understand just what this all means? Do we focus too much on the particular but lose sight of the amazing picture of which all these events are but a part?

The birth of Christ as God made human – Emanuel, God with us – is not just a miracle, it is an astounding affirmation of God's continuing love for his creation:

For God so loved the world that He gave us His only Son.

This surely is an 'emergency contact point' that merits us standing in awe before the manger, in awe before the Christ child. The natal events which took place in Bethlehem about two thousand years ago need to be much more than

just the subject of sweet images and words; we need to be continually, renewably shocked by their existential power they offer to our lives here and now. The touch point of Eternity with temporal existence two thousand years ago then becomes more than an historical marvel, but a continuously powerful affirmation that each Christmas is a breaking through into our troubled world of the light of God.

The main entrance of our Cathedral is referred to as the West door, anyone with the vaguest sense of the cardinal points of the compass, will know that is a nonsense. Our West door is actually in the southeast. But, by architectural tradition for cathedrals, we call it the West door because it stands opposite the focal point – the High Altar which is in the liturgical East - the East, where the Light breaks upon the world each and every day. So should we think of each Christmas, that it is the breaking into our lives of the Light of Christ. As each year has passed, with all its varied experiences for each of us, there will have been joys but also woes and sorrows. Yet, despite all this, each year, we get to celebrate anew the birth of the Christ child, a triple zero emergency contact point reminder to each of us that, despite all the travails, Emanuel – God is now with us, indeed has never left us.

Some wish each other Merry Christmas, others in some feigned secularism prefer Happy Holiday. Let me unpack each of these a little. Happy Holiday in fact means Happy Holy Day – surely the ‘emergency contact point’ of God’s breaking into our world in the presence of His Son was and is such a holy day.

As to Merry Christmas, back in the early C19 the word ‘merry’ meant ‘blessed’. So may I wish each and every one of you that THIS Christmas may be a ‘Merry Christmas’, both in the C19 sense that it be a blessed occasion, and in the C21 sense that you have a good one.