

# The Bishop's Christmas Message 2016

To the Clergy and People of the Diocese of Lismore, to each and all in communion with the Church through baptism and the Holy Spirit:



*“To us a Child is born,  
to us a Son is given –  
the mighty God,  
the Prince of Peace.”*

ONCE more this Christmas, in readings and sung in carols, we shall hear these familiar words of Isaiah foretelling the birth of the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord. The birth of a child brings joy, the delight of an emerging personality, hope for the future. Each newborn child raises the question once asked about the infant John the Baptist: “What kind of child will this be?”

The great thing for us Christian people is indeed what kind of child John turned out to be, and even more so what kind of child Jesus turned out to be. Who Jesus Christ is forms the core of our faith. The yearly cycle of the Church's feasts in which we encounter the powerful events of the Lord's birth, death, resurrection and return to the Father, refresh and charge anew our energies of faith and discipleship in this world. That's intentional. It's the fulfilment of Christ's promise, “I will not leave you as orphans,” “I am with you always, to the end of time.”

Christmas for us is a wonderful time. Even its crass jingle bells materialism all around us is a reflection of the truth of the Word made Flesh – the unseen God now has visible material form in a human body which will become the sacrifice that saves us. Our gift-giving at this time is all because God first gave each of us such a great gift.

The confidence and joy that is God's ongoing gift to us each Christmas helps us to keep a right perspective amid all the negative and worrying things that cast a gloom and an uncertainty across our society. It has been a tough year for everyone who loves the Church as we have faced our failures under the scrutiny of the Royal Commission and responded to the pain of the victims of child sexual abuse within our communities. We await the recommendations of the Royal Commission as it concludes its work in 2017. At all levels of the Church we are determined that our parishes and all our institutions will be the safest of places for all children.

Across a wider view, the biggest challenge for Christians is to find a language that can communicate with a society that is increasing unable or unwilling to form any religious view. Its politically correct gurus deny that there are universal truths or a reality founded in human nature. We look on in amazement that within such a short span of years gender theorists can demand

we accept the idea that being male and female are identities imposed upon us and from which we must free ourselves to decide what we would like to be. This is stranger even than seeing nothing peculiar in the word ‘marriage’ being applied to a relationship between two persons of the same sex.

The fact is that once God has been removed from the picture human beings are without any fixed points of reference. Believing in nothing leads to believing in anything. We are beginning to see the high price being paid for this willed disconnection from the good, the true, and the beautiful in the ugliness of disorientation and lostness, escape into the dead ends of drug addiction and casual sex, and a despairing fear of the future that follows on from the loss of personal bearings that can be relied upon. Let's pray this Christmas that the Child born to us will reveal to many Australians the true bearings of their way home to the Father.

Last year in this letter I asked for your Christmas prayers and remembrances for the Christians suffering so terribly in Iraq and Syria. In the last twelve months the tragedy has reached new horrors for these people as we watch helplessly the bombardment to liberate Aleppo. Happily, many of them have been among the 8,317 refugees from Syria and Iraq brought to Australia by our government in a policy announcing 12,000 new places. But why is it that a country like ours, with its deep Christian roots and largely Christian population, cannot stir its elected representatives to give refugee status specifically to greater numbers of persecuted Christians, as well as to other religious minorities suffering in the same way?

The people of these Christian communities - Egyptian Copts, Lebanese Maronites and Melkites, Iraqi Chaldeans and Assyrians in particular - who have already settled in Australia characteristically integrate and learn English quickly, find employment in trades and professions, and educate and bring their families up to promising futures in this country. Like the postwar immigrations from countries such as Italy, Greece, Poland and later Vietnam they bring great contributions to the diverse social fabric of our country. A sad aspect is that all of them love their homelands and heritage, and in leaving them behind feel they have diminished their capacity for political and social recovery. The Chaldean Catholics, for instance, who have large communities in Australia led by Archbishop Amel Nona in Sydney, trace a heritage back to the Assyrians of Mesopotamia centuries before Christ.

To us a Child is born, to us a Son is given. May the peace of our new-born Saviour, and the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, remain in your hearts and homes during this Holy Season, and also especially with refugee families who at this moment have neither home nor assured future.

✠ Geoffrey Jarrett, Bishop of Lismore, 17 December 2016

