

CHRISTMAS HOMILY ESSENDON 2020
Lk 2.1-20 Is 9.1-7 Titus 2.11-14
Rhyme Bible: “The Special Baby” and “The Shepherds”

Well, well, here we are again, as yet another Christmas crashes in upon us, and isn't it a mixed bag? Last year at Christmas, I referred to 2019 disappearing into the smoke and mist, and now it's 2020 nearly gone, and I think we will all be happy and hopefully relieved to see the end of this unprecedented year.

My retired priest friend, Eric Hodgens, ponders on this strange Christmas with the heading: **“Merry Christmas – 2020 – Really?”**, as he looks at the mixture of sacred and secular images of the season: *“It is, above all, a family feast, not just a church one. It has an undisputed place in the national culture of the West... For Christians, Christmas celebrated a key belief that God is incarnate in our world... the human face of the invisible God and the reassurance that God is intimately involved with humanity. But it is the trimmings of Christmas which engage us more. The crib with Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Christmas carols, Christmas trees, gift-giving, and a bit of indulgent eating and drinking. Our imagination is full of scenes which scream Christmas.”* And he's right, isn't he?

Eric's conclusion is that we can certainly sincerely say **Merry Christmas**, but with the warning that we can't say it with meaning unless we take *“some personal action. And the recipe for that action is central to the Gospel message of Jesus. We are called to be a commonwealth of peoples, not a conglomeration of self-interested individuals”*, even though some misguided so-called leaders might prefer to think the latter.

The good news is that we are all here, and that the world is a safer place with the promise of coronavirus vaccines well on the way and more positive and moderate leadership in some places on the global scene, and let's remember my favourite photographs of the Third Rock from the Sun, planet Earth, from Apollo 8 on Christmas Eve in 1968, when the astronauts read from Genesis, in awe of the beauty and fragility of our precious planet, now inhabited by 7.7 billion of us. And then there is **Earthrise** of Apollo XI from the moon in 1969. Does this not make us attentive to our responsibility to tread lightly and protect its resources for future generations? Our world is a wonderful place to be, and Christmas should remind us of our responsibility to enjoy and find happiness in life, and to make the most of our opportunities, as we try to follow the path of Jesus as faithful disciples.

In many ways, 2020 has been a very testing year, where we have learned to do things differently and make the most of the limitations imposed on us all by the restrictions, which seemed draconian at times. Yet, look at the positive results, as we come back to some semblance of normal church, community and family life. The tough times have paid off, and there have been the enhancement of time for communication and appreciation of each other in family life, for using our time more productively, working and studying on-line together, and a good side effect in there being less pollution. We have to be thankful for modern technology, which has enabled so much of life and interaction with each other, to have gone on. It would have been so much more difficult a century ago in 1919, with the Spanish Flu pandemic!

Yes, there has been much anxiety and uncertainty in the whole process, with loss of livelihoods, jobs, income, heavy financial pressures on families, in particular, and the best laid plans for travel and adventure cancelled, but hopefully, things will pick up in time, as long as we continue to be careful and do our best to support and understand each other. It hasn't been easy, but then nor is life, but here we are, reflecting on the true meaning of life and faith in a Gospel context. At least we've been able now to get back together, although physically distanced here in church, in time to celebrate the spirit of Christmas with Eucharist, after an extraordinary 8 months of closure.

Charles Dickens's dark character, from his 1843 classic **A Christmas Tale**, old **‘Bah! Humbug!’** miserable Scrooge was haunted and taunted by his ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future, until he woke up to Tiny Tim's exclamation **“Merry Christmas, everyone”**, such that he could finally respond with a generous heart to the poor Cratchit family's needs, and join in with their celebration, with Dr Seuss's Grinch conversion, after he woke up to the fact that a giving heart with a smile leads to happiness, not ongoing misery in isolation and resentment of those having fun together, as he finally realized that *“Christmas doesn't just come from a store, but means a lot more.”*

Luke's theological themes are many and varied, as he surveys the scene and interprets the Christian message in his own unique way, with the lovely picture painted of universality, simplicity, poverty, peace and joy. The Jerome Biblical Commentary describes it as a rich theological tapestry woven by Luke, with his creative imagination in full flight. At the heart of it all is the belief in the mystery of divine intervention in human history, in a very human way, an obscure and natural birth to loving parents. It's a story we can all relate to and appreciate.

And here's my Christmas story for 2020, titled "*Tari's First Christmas*" (by Mary Diestel-Fedderson), with an Aussie touch.

We need the Christmas spirit of peace and good will, ongoing, in abundance in our wonderful and diverse, but complex and troubled world of today, in order to make it better for tomorrow, acknowledging his presence in our lives and living out his message, for which he came to proclaim.

A Happy or Merry Christmas to all, near and far.

Joyeux Noel, Felix Navidad, Buon Natale, Nolag Sona Dibh (deev), Salamat Natal, Shengdan jie kuaile, Giang sinh vui ve, Maligayang Pasko, Zalig Kezstfest, Frohe Weihnachten, Vesele vanoce (Czech!) Kalli Kristougega.

john hannon

25th December 2020