

# Hope, peace, love and joy—the choicest gifts we can share

*Notes to a Sermon Preached by Dr Murray Harvey, Bishop of Grafton*

Christmas Eve 2020



Above: Emelisa Mudle. *Hope, peace, love, joy all lift you up*

What is the true spirit of Christmas? We'll each have our own answer to that question. For some, it will be the giving and receiving of gifts. For others, it's not so much about opening our presents, but opening our hearts; spending time with family and friends. For many it will have something to do with food, such as the Christmas Roast or the Plum Pudding. Others are convinced that Santa embodies the true spirit of Christmas. For still others, Christmas is something to be endured: "Christmas is like a thunderstorm" one author reflected, "we all have to endure it together". The true spirit of Christmas is hard to find today amidst all the distractions and commercialism of a 'secular' Christmas. For Anglican Christians, our journey through the season of Advent has lead us here tonight, to the Manger, to the true spirit of Christmas. Four themes of Advent, hope, peace, love and joy, provide some clues as to the true meaning of Christmas. These are four themes of the Advent Wreath and were worthy of our reflection as we prepared for the celebration of Christmas. They are not only key themes in our preparation for Christmas but are key to the living out of the gospel message of Christmas as well. It's worthwhile taking a step back and looking at the four themes again, taken together:

**Hope.** In the midst of COVID-19 we are reminded that hope is for *today*. We can't hope *tomorrow* we can only hope *today*. The Kingdom of God is in our hearts and we carry the hope of the Kingdom into the world. As Desmond Tutu once said, 'hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness'. As the words of Matthew 12:21 remind us, the coming of the Messiah was awaited with hopeful expectation: "His name will be the hope of all the nations". Christmas is not just about what you and I hope for, but how we bring this hope of God to the lives of others. During COVID-19 many young people from around the world have shared with the Taize Community in France their worries about the future. The Taize message for 2021 addresses these concerns in *Hoping in Season and Out of Season*<sup>1</sup> [https://www.taize.fr/IMG/pdf/message2021\\_en.pdf](https://www.taize.fr/IMG/pdf/message2021_en.pdf). It asks, 'what can we trust and rely on when everything is so uncertain?' We need to resist becoming disenchanted and pay attention to signs of hope.



**Peace.** With the tremendous suffering that we are seeing because of COVID-19, peace seems as far away as ever. Protests over COVID-19 restrictions have created even more suffering and fear. Yet in Christian and Jewish thought peace is more than just the absence of conflict. We can't wait for world peace before seeking peace in our own lives and communities. Like hope, we can't put it off until tomorrow. Our model and guide is the Holy Trinity, one God in three persons, dwelling together in perfect harmony and peace. As we heard in tonight's Gospel reading from Luke, peace was the song of the heavenly host of Angels at the manger: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours" [Luke 2:14]. The Taizé Community message challenges us as we think ahead to 2021: Who will be daring enough to be creators of justice and peace beyond the divisions that are splitting our societies apart?



**Love.** Love is of course part of the true spirit of Christmas. *Out of the great love with which he loved us* [Ephesians 2:4], God sent his son to be one of us. This love offering on the part of God demands a response of love, as Christina Rossetti's Poem *In the Bleak Midwinter* exclaims: *What can I give him, poor as I am? ... Yet what I can I give him, give my heart.*



**Joy.** We often assume that joy and happiness are the same thing. We often use the words interchangeably. Yet happiness is fickle and dependent upon circumstances. Let's face it, most of us weren't very happy for much of 2020. Fear of the pandemic, grief, isolation from family and friends, border closures, anxiety and ever changing restrictions all played their part. Yet for the Christian, joy runs much deeper than happiness. It emerges from an inner confidence in God's presence and promise. When life is tough and we are suffering, we won't be very happy about it, but we can still have an inner joy that God is there with us and offers us something better. As Luke's Gospel reminds us tonight, the message of the Angels for the Shepherds in the midst of their fear was one of joy: *"Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord"* [Luke 2:10-11]. The Taizé Message for 2021 points out that *Joy is renewed when we live as brothers and sisters, when we remain alongside the most deprived: the homeless, men and women who are elderly, ill or lonely, children in difficulty, people living with disabilities, migrants.... Life's circumstances can make us all vulnerable.* I wonder, what opportunities do we have to renew joy in this way?



So these 'clues' - hope, peace, love and joy, have led us to the true meaning of Christmas. These four, hope, peace, love and joy, are Kingdom values—they characterise the very nature of God and they characterise life in his Kingdom. But we can't wait until the final consummation of his Kingdom. We have to live these values now. God knows we need them now! Thankfully God didn't wait. He acted for hope, peace, love and joy in the birth of his son. The poem entitled *First Coming* (see below) draws our attention to this. Madeleine D'Engle writes, "He did not wait till the world was ready ... He did not wait for the perfect time, he came when the need was deep and great ..." So too we cannot wait until *tomorrow* or for a future *perfect time*: "We cannot wait until the world is sane to raise our songs with joyful voice ..." Ours is to live hopefully, peacefully, lovingly and joyfully *now*.

The gospel story we read at Christmas from Luke is eloquent and almost magical in its simplicity. Luke conveys that God is up to something. What is being offered here, the story that is being told in the birth of Jesus, is something of God's own self. God is giving, affirming, protecting, renewing, gathering. In the birth of the Christ child God offers us a way by which hope, peace, love and joy can truly be part of your life and my life and the life of our communities here and now.

Lutheran scholar Mark Wegener<sup>2</sup> writes that in the birth of Christ, God touches our lives with grace and changes us, turning us into people who can share this hope, peace, love and joy — the choicest gifts we can share today and every day. Where is hope present in your life right now? For you, is joy more than just happiness, and if so, how could you describe it? Reflecting on your relationships, how could you bring more peace and love into them?

Mary's response to these events was a song (The Magnificat or Mary's Song, see Luke 1:46-55). Hers was the best response. As one writer<sup>3</sup> puts it, the best response to Christmas is a song, rather than a sermon; praise rather than explanation. So perhaps I'll leave it there! May you live a peaceful, hopeful, loving and joyful Christmas.

+Murray H

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#### Notes.

1. *Hoping in Season and Out of Season: A Message for 2021*, Taize, France, December 2020
2. Mark Wegener, *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, Oct 1994, p.394.
3. Ian Duffield, *Expository Times*, November 2015, p. 81.

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[Bishop of Grafton - Anglican Diocese of Grafton \(graftondiocese.org.au\)](http://graftondiocese.org.au)

First Coming by Madeleine L'Engle

He did not wait till the world was ready,  
till men and nations were at peace.  
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,  
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.  
He came when the need was deep and great.  
He dined with sinners in all their grime,  
turned water into wine. He did not wait

till hearts were pure. In joy he came  
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.  
To a world like ours, of anguished shame  
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,  
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.  
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh  
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane  
to raise our songs with joyful voice,  
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,  
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

