

2020 Christmas Messages from Leaders of Christian Churches in Australia

PREPARING OPTIMISTICALLY FOR CHRISTMAS.

A Prayer from Bishop Philip Huggins

Gracious God,

We give thanks, as with optimistic hearts, we are once again renewed by the Nativity scene of Christmas.

You are “utterly kind and unassuming”; as beloved Julian of Norwich learned in the Revelations you gave her of your Divine Love.

We see your ways in the eternal story of shepherds and magi, gathered with a young country couple, in that blessed stable of Bethlehem.

Preparing now for Christmas, we pray for your grace.

May we be utterly kind and unassuming ourselves.

Coming amongst us so vulnerably, baby Jesus in a manger, we see your risk taking ways in love.

May we also be risk takers in love.

“Behold, I bring you good tidings” was the message of your angels to the shepherds, watching their flocks by night.

May we also bear good tidings all the way to Christmas 2020 and beyond.

We pray these prayers of our hearts in your holy name, AMEN.

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

(NB. In the Western Church, Christmas is celebrated on Friday 25 December 2020.
Most Orthodox Churches will celebrate the Feast of the Nativity on Thursday 7 January 2021.)

12 messages follow.

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

Anglican Church of Australia

I think it's true to say I am a fairly well organised person. I don't like leaving things until the last minute, so last year I had my Christmas sermon well and truly finished by mid-December. Then on December 21st came a devastating bushfire in the Adelaide Hills, just 25 kilometres from the Adelaide CBD. I thought my original sermon was pretty good, but in the light of the fire I re-wrote my sermon on Christmas Eve. Of course I didn't realise it at the time but that was the beginning of a year of change and uncertainty. I, like many people this year, have had to re-write, re-plan, re-schedule, change, cancel, and postpone as I never have before. I am holding off this year's Christmas sermon because I just don't know what will happen in the next month, and I don't really want to have to start from scratch again.

My sense is Australians are really looking forward to Christmas this year. We are looking forward to some fun, some celebration, some rest, and some distraction. Maybe we are looking forward to the 'normal' traditions of Christmas at the end of a year that has been anything but normal.

I am looking forward to Christmas this year for those reasons too, but also because I need the Christmas reminder that in Jesus, God is with us. We might be conscious we are living in uncertain times, but the context of Jesus birth was full of uncertainty. Palestine was oppressed by the occupying Roman Empire. Various parties within Judaism were jockeying for influence and enthusiastically trying to recruit people to their cause. Rather than a situation of peace and goodwill, Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Jesus was a place of hardship, confusion and tension. Christmas card designs (and some Christmas carols) might give us the impression that all was peaceful and calm, but the reality was the opposite.

Into that situation of uncertainty and suffering came Jesus: God among us. Jesus didn't come to 'fix' the situation of the first century, nor distract people from it. Jesus came to point to some really important truths. Truths like: God had not abandoned his people or his promises to them and, God's vision for the future of the world - the reign of God, was moving to completion. Not only did Jesus point to these things, but his life death and resurrection was fundamental in their fulfilment; a fulfilment we continue to pray for and work towards.

Jesus' life began in a community marked by uncertainty, fear, change and suffering. God among us came not in a time of peace and prosperity but a time of difficulty. This year seems perfectly placed to welcome him again and be reminded that in Jesus God is with us. God has not abandoned this world but loves it deeply and is faithful to his promises.

In a time of uncertainty, God is one we can be certain of. That of course doesn't 'fix' COVID in the same way that it doesn't 'fix' any difficulty we are enduring. But God's love and faithfulness, exemplified in the events of Christmas, can help us to have hope and peace and even joy.

I wish you a Christmas celebration blessed by the presence of Christ.

*The Most Reverend Geoffrey Smith, Primate,
Anglican Church of Australia*

Assyrian Church of the East

After experiencing a difficult and dark year burdened with trials and uncertainties, here we are coming to the end of 2020, preparing ourselves once more to celebrate the birth of Christ renewed with hope and optimism. The event of the birth of Christ over 2020 years ago was the bright light that pierced the dark night of Bethlehem enlightening the hearts and souls of those who awaited God's salvation. He still, even today, is the light that shines in our hearts and gives us hope for peace and tranquillity. He is the only hope that humanity can depend on in times of crisis and trials. He is always ready to extend His hand and save us from our pains and sufferings. He is our healer, the eternal promise of hope, eternally present with us with His sweet and caring voice declaring; ***'I am always with you until the end of time.'*** Matt 28:20

Let us join together, during these festive times of His glorious birth, in praising Him for His mercy and compassion, praying to Him; *"Come you earthly and heavenly ones. Wonder and be astonished at the greatness of the mercy. By which our race has come to the great heights of the incomprehensible Godhead. Let heaven and earth, and all that is in them, confess Him who exalted our race. Who has renewed our image and wiped out our iniquity. He has called us by his Name and has made all things subject to us. He is worthy of glory from all mouths. Who has lifted us above all. Blessed is the Compassionate one, who, when we sought him not, came forth to seek us and rejoiced in giving us life. Let us all give praise to him. For ever and ever."* Amen

Archbishop Mar Meelis Zaia AM, Metropolitan
Assyrian Church of the East

Diocese of the Armenian Church of Australia and New Zealand

"Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and goodwill among men"

(Luke 2:14).

Many churches and people around the world had various plans and activities for 2020, however COVID-19 changed our whole life. We had to adapt to new situations and a new way of life. Many lost loved ones and many more struggled against the virus and its effects on the economy and society.

As St Paul said, ***"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed"*** (2 Cor 4:8-9).

We are blessed in Australia, through the tough steps taken by the leaders; the damage and suffering comparatively was at a minimum, with Jesus' help we shall overcome this evil as well.

In the Armenian Church, beside the COVID 19, we tried to reach out to our brothers and sisters in Syria and Lebanon, as if those sufferings were not enough, the war and tragedy of Karabagh has additionally seen thousands of deaths and wounded people, while those who lost their homes and livelihood count tens of thousands.

May the birth of the newborn Prince of Peace bring new hope of life to all humanity, may the crying voices cease, the wounded be healed and the hopeless find refuge in the Lord.

May the bells of Christmas ring again and our prayers rise to God as blessings, offerings, and glorification.

With Blessings

*Archbishop Haigazoun Najarian, Primate
Diocese of the Armenian Church of Australia and New Zealand*

Catholic Church in Australia

This will be a Christmas like no other. Restrictions may be eased, but we will still have to cope with registration, distancing, sanitising and all the other things that have become part of our lives through this extraordinary year. We won't have the crowds at Mass; the parties will be quieter; the sights and sounds of Christmas will be more subdued.

Yet the star will still rise and lead us, like the Wise Men, through the desert of COVID-19 into new territory. The star will still shine in the darkness, coming to rest over the strange place where the royal Child lies, leading us to him with our gifts. Nothing – not even the virus – can stop the star from shining and doing its work. Nothing – not even the virus – can stop the Child being born; and nothing can stop us from making our journey to offer him our homage. We will come with all the searchers.

We will come with the shepherds, who were not led by a star but sent by angels who shone around them as light in the darkness, telling them who the Child was and where he could be found. We will come with poor shepherds who bring no rich gifts, only the gift of themselves, our faith, our hope, our love. We will come with the outsiders.

The virus has been no respecter of personages; rich and poor alike have been struck, though the poor have suffered more, as they always do. But so too the love of God which takes flesh in the Child is no respecter of personages. It touches rich and poor alike, though the poor are given preference, as they always are with God. We will come with the poor.

We will also come with the animals, with the camels of the Wise Men, the sheep of the shepherds, the ox and the donkey sheltering in the stable. We will come with them because this birth is for the whole of creation. Our common home becomes God's home too once the Child is born. We will come with all of God's creatures.

When heaven and earth become one, as they do in the Child, all things are woven together in the vast ecology of love. God, angels, stars, humans, animals, plants, earth: all hold together gloriously in the Word-made-flesh in whom they came to be. With him at the heart of it, this Christmas like no other will be just like all the others.

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

Chinese Methodist Church in Australia

Christmas is around the corner. I believe Christmas in this pandemic period will be even more significant and meaningful to all of us this year. We are forced to stay at home during the lockdown and we reflect more on the purpose of life. Our health is not in our control and our life can be fragile and weak. What is our purpose living in this world? I believe this question arises in the minds of many people during pandemic. Let's ponder upon the birth of Jesus Christ who is the only begotten Son of God. His birth, the incarnation is the love that God has for us. God's love is the purpose of our life.

Christmas is a time of giving and receiving gifts. Hence, Christmas period is famous to be the season of preparing presents. However, the greatest gift of Christmas is Jesus Christ. Through His birth we have hope, to be saved from sin and reconciled to God. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are affirmed with the grace He had for us.

After we received the greatest gift, we are given a new life -- a life full of God's love and hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. After receiving the gift of God's begotten Son, we should share the love of God with the people around us in our community. In this season of Christmas, let us not only give presents to our family members and friends, but also care for those who are physically, mentally, and spiritually in need.

The founder of Methodist movement John Wesley always emphasized community care; particularly he mentioned the social holiness that is to spread God's love in our society. The book of Hebrew said, "And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." (Heb13:16) Hence, in this Christmas pandemic year, let us share God's love around by helping those who are in need and spreading the joyful message to one another as a sign of Christmas celebration

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

Churches of Christ in Australia

'We have seen his glory!' exclaims John in the opening of the Gospel (1:14), **'the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth'**. It is a heartfelt description of the coming of Jesus to dwell with us. This description of the incarnation has richer meaning at Christmas.

This is God with us, in vulnerability and with a journey of growth and maturity to come. There is no dramatic 'time travel' delivering an 'adult' from heaven. Instead God comes as a baby.

What a great risk this is. A baby born to parents on the road, far from home, in a time of Roman rule and with the accommodation being rudimentary, at best. No family support and no special treatment for this young family.

There is deep trust in who Mary and Joseph are and in the people who surround them – shepherds and strangers. Mary and Joseph's journey continues to unfold, including fleeing

persecution in the safety of Egypt and with the passing of time there is resettlement and home making in Nazareth.

Once again we celebrate this birth at Christmas. In the midst of people's vulnerability due to the multi-layered impact of COVID -19 we can give thanks. God is with us: calming, reassuring and life giving. God has come in Jesus, full of grace and truth and makes his home with us.

*Rev John Gilmore,
Churches of Christ in Australia*

Coptic Orthodox Church

Diocese of Sydney and Affiliated Regions

The Feast of the Nativity 2020

It is my privilege to extend to you a blessed Feast of the Nativity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Our Lord Jesus Christ came to give light to the world. His life giving teachings on love, forgiveness, peace and reconciliation, illuminated our minds, which were darkened and had gone astray from the way of God.

This was a fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy, **"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined."** (Isaiah 9:2).

Christ said, **"I am the Light of the world."** (John 8:12). Christ entered our world to dispel darkness, disunity, disillusionment, discontentment and dissatisfaction.

Therefore, to give us a meaningful and purposeful life, Christ said, **"I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly."** (John 10:10).

This year, 2020, fear, stress, anxiety and uncertainty descended upon humanity as a consequence of the pandemic, COVID 19. However, Christ's light will prevail over all waves of darkness.

We pray that Christ our Lord bless Australia and the whole world and keep all humanity safe in His mighty, blessed hands.

*His Grace Bishop Daniel
Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church -Diocese of Sydney & Affiliated Regions*

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!" (Luke 2:14)*

As we celebrate the birth in the flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ we contemplate before us the mystery of the Incarnation, according to which God becomes human so as to make us, 'gods by grace', granting to all the unfailing hope of eternal life.

This message of hope is all the more important for us to reflect upon this year; a year which has been especially difficult and unsettling -with the fires of last summer, the tenacity of the pandemic, the rising tension between nations, not to mention the devastating effects to the wellbeing of people that these have engendered.

Beyond these problems, the promise of Christmas, however, is one of unfailing hope that we will be able to rebuild our lives once again in His truth and light. Without Christ, we remain poor and miserable, forever thirsting for the peace that He brings.

For this reason, may we fervently redirect our life in love towards Christ. Let us place Christ and our neighbour as the fundamental priorities in our life this festive season. Let us learn to love the spirit not the body; charity not avarice; sacrifice not self-serving interests; weakness not strength; humility not power. May love for Christ and neighbour begin to permeate every facet of our existence as we share the joy of His lowly Birth and the eternal hope that lies within us.

Wishing all a blessed and joyous Nativity and, I remain,

In Sydney, on the 4th day of December, 2020

Prayerfully yours,

*Archbishop Makarios, Primate
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia*

Religious Society of Friends in Australia (Quakers)

Welcome Light!

Light that enlightens us all, dwell with us this season.

Open us to your Presence in new and wondrous ways.

Transform us. Grace us.

Guide our steps in the ways of peace.

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

The Salvation Army Australia

No one can deny that 25 December is one of the most significant and anticipated days of the year. People spend months preparing and planning for what they hope will be an unforgettable day where families will come together to celebrate.

However, Christmas 2020 will look very different for most of us. COVID-19 has changed the way we not only prepare for Christmas, but will also impact how, and with whom, we can celebrate. Many people have a sense that Christmas has been changed forever, and that it may never look or feel the same again.

This Christmas comes at the end of the most difficult, trying and testing year, but even though the way we celebrate Christmas will be different, God's gift to us remains the same. Jesus, hope of the world, born as a baby, Saviour of the world.

What an amazing display of love. Nothing – not even a global pandemic, can take that from us. ***“Thanks be to God for his gift that is too wonderful to describe.”*** 2 Corinthians 9:15 {NIV}.

And that gift is ours, undeserved, unsolicited, but an expression of his amazing love for us. It is the gift that keeps on giving. It comes at great cost and is ours for the taking.

“His love has no limits, His grace has no measure, His power no boundary known unto men, for out of His infinite riches in Jesus, He gives and gives and gives again.” Annie Johnson Flint.

We wish you a Christmas with a deeper meaning this year. Our prayer is that we will all take some time to reflect with humility and gratitude and awe on the gift of God that keeps on giving, Emmanuel, God with us.

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

Uniting Church in Australia

May the love of God be with you this Christmas, as we welcome the coming of Christ into our world, so disrupted by pandemic, violence, and loss.

Some of the most heart wrenching images of 2020 have been those of people separated from the ones they love – family, friends, and communities. We have grieved over the inability to be present with each other at significant times in our lives.

We have endured this separation, for the common good and the long-term benefit and protection of others, to stop the spread of COVID-19.

As the Australian community and as churches, we've responded creatively, overcoming separation through technology, new and old, and many acts of kindness.

In this challenging year, many people have taken time to consider what matters most to us, to our communities, and to our world.

As we approach this Christmas, what matters most is not the gifts, the decorations or even the Christmas carols that we so enjoy, what matters most is the love we share with each other, the friendship and community that gives us life.

The central message of Christmas is that we are loved.

We are loved by the God who comes to us in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ who lights up our lives and world with a message of peace, love and hope.

At Christmas, we experience a God who is not distant or impervious to our suffering, because God comes to us in Jesus, the one who understands suffering and embodies for us, God's boundless love. Nothing can separate us from this love and compassion of Christ.

This Christmas, after such a difficult year, Christ's invitation to love our neighbours through acts of compassion and hospitality is more timely than ever. As you reach out to your neighbours and communities, may your life be blessed with the love, comfort, and hope that are God's gift in Jesus.

Have a blessed Christmas. May the peace of Christ be with you.

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

Australian Baptist Ministries

HOPE SHATTERED HOPE RESTORED...

2020 has seen a global health crisis unlike any in our life time — one that is killing people, spreading human suffering, and upending people's lives. But this is much more than a health crisis. It is a human, economic and social crisis.

It is no wonder that almost nine in ten Australians (88%) are excited to close the door on 2020 and start 2021 according to McCrindle research. Many have lost the source of their confidence in 2020 and hope has been shattered. As industries have shut down, jobs have been lost, and health has been compromised, many people are experiencing the shattering of the things in which they put their hope.

Can Christmas 2020 help restore that lost hope?

The global crisis accentuates that we really need this Christmas because it gives us the opportunity to remind ourselves of where hope can be restored.

The Christmas story as it unfolds in the Bible is associated with family connection. Jesus' birth is a local family event. The shepherds on the Bethlehem hills discovered the newborn baby in the simplest of family scenes. Christmas is an opportunity to reaffirm the importance of family; an opportunity to commit to working to strengthen families and not weaken them. Let's especially remember families in difficult circumstances because of COVID-19, our neighbours, sole-parent, unemployed and refugee families. As well as families in isolated indigenous communities, drought affected rural areas and those still recovering from the tragic bushfires of 2019/20. The strengthening of our family bonds and community connection can restore hope.

Christmas reaffirms the value of giving, over and against getting. The Bible narratives of the first Christmas record that the wise men came, bearing gifts, for this newborn baby who would change the course of human history. Everyone needs to be reassured that others are really interested in them and gifts give tangible expression to this basic need. Could we work together as a nation to bring hope to the less well-off in our world by being more generous in our support through disaster relief and development aid?

Christmas ultimately provides the opportunity to restore hope by focusing on our own personal spirituality and well-being. Christmas marks the intervention of the eternal creator God into the personal history of every one of us. Eugene Peterson in the Message Bible puts it simply: "And this sublime Word (God himself) became flesh and blood and moved into our neighbourhood." God with us and for us.

As we enter into Christmas celebrations this year let's take up God's invitation to accept His gift of Jesus as the conduit to restore hope in situations where hope has been shattered.

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