

# THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS

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Well, of course Christmas has well and truly gone,

- The gifts have all been put away in the cupboards – or eaten!
- The ones that didn't fit have been returned to the shops for exchange.
- The ones that didn't work have been handed back to the dealer for repair.
- The Christmas Tree and the decorations have been stacked back in the cupboard for another year.
- And maybe we have gone crazy at the New Year's sales.
- And maybe we have sent belated New Years cards to those whom we have inadvertently overlooked on our Christmas list.
- And the New Years celebrations have also passed.
- We have had our parties, watched the fireworks, sung Auld Lang Syne together.
- And we have made our New Year's resolutions.

And now we face the New Year with all its potential, for happiness or heartache (or maybe both!) – For fulfilment or failure. For feeling loved and/or feeling lost.

What message can we take with us into this unknown territory?  
How can we equip ourselves to cope with what lies around the corner?

It seems these days as if we increasingly need to draw on God's strength, wisdom, perspective and love. Life seems to be more frantic, more brutal, more uncaring and more complicated than ever before. If ever there was a crying need for the Christmas message to continue with us into the New Year, it is now.

What is the Christmas message? Not Santa Claus, not holidays, not feasting, not even family - although all those things are very nice and can make for a memorable and meaningful season. The season of Christmas

is all about communication – God communicating with us. And today I want to say four things briefly about communication :-

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**Firstly**, one needs to make a connection before communication can take place. It's no use talking into a void, it's no use talking to yourself, it's no use talking in a isolated desert, it's no use talking in a crowd unless there is someone there who is responding. One must make the connection.

There is quite an extensive branch of science occupied in trying to make contact with any intelligent beings who might be out there somewhere in space. They prepare and send out messages constantly and they listen very closely for any possible structured signal that might indicate that we are not alone in the Universe. The project is called SETI – Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence - and they are trying to make a connection; but until now there has been no success, no communication whatsoever.

At Christmas we remember the special event at Bethlehem when God reached into the affairs of men and women in a most special way. He was making the connection to show His love and concern for this world of ours – this extremely fragile planet that we call home.

**Secondly** we need to speak the same language for there to be any communication. It may be in written words, verbally or in body language but it must be the same.

Some time ago when we were living in Pennant Hills, I noticed one day a little lizard caught in our bath. Because of the slippery sides it couldn't escape and was destined to die there unless something could be done for it. So I reached in gently to try and capture it and lift it to safety. Of course it was terrified and tried as hard as it could to escape my grasp. I finally managed to corner it and get it into the palm of my hand without it losing its tail or coming to any grief. How much easier it would have been if another lizard could have explained to it the predicament it was in – in lizard language – be not afraid! -something it could relate to!

At Christmas, God's message was to be expressed in particularly human terms – in a language we could all understand. A little human babe who would grow up to know and experience all the emotions that affect us day by day.

- He would know happiness, sadness and tragedy.
- He would know pain, frustration and disappointment.
- He would know love and nobility.
- But he would also see selfishness, greed, arrogance and corruption.
- In short he would experience all the facets of being human for he was human.

Who better then to speak to us in our own language of the Fatherhood and love of God, and the yearning this same God had to welcome us into his arms?

**Thirdly**, you need a message to communicate. If I just say

*“But fish running although green seven however”*

I can make the connection, I can speak loudly so that you can hear me and I have your attention – and I am speaking the same language namely English but there is no message, just a jumble of words so there is no communication. Sometimes after a stroke people think they are making sense but in fact only gobbledook is coming out – and there is no communication to the despair of the loved ones gathered around the patient.

At Christmas there was a most definite message encapsulated in the word EMMANUEL God with us now and forever.

- No matter how bleak and hopeless things may appear.
- No matter how alone we might feel.
- No matter how helpless we may feel to make things right.
- No matter how inadequate we might feel.

God is right there beside us waiting to be our source of new courage and new strength, new vision and imagination.

**Fourthly** and finally It is important not to get the wrong message. Let me tell you about something that happened to me just before Christmas quite a few a few years ago now.

I was driving to work to put some finishing touches on some projects before the vacation. I was already in the Christmas mood – looking forward to a much needed break and feeling goodwill to all people.

I was approaching the lights between Roseville and Chatswood where you turn right from Boundary Rd into Penshurst St to go on to Willoughby – and we were stopped in a line in Boundary Rd waiting for the lights to turn green. As I stopped in this line, the apple that was part of my lunch rolled and fell forward onto the floor of the car. Being a person who endeavours to use my time efficiently, I thought I would retrieve the apple as I was waiting. So I leant forward to get it. Unfortunately, during this process my elbow brushed against the horn giving rise to an angry blast.

I sat back immediately and smiled in an embarrassed way to show that all was well. But I don't think the young lady in front of me saw me!

Well the lights were still red and the apple was still on the floor so I thought I would try again – this time watching my elbow very closely. There is in fact a slight downward slope on the road at this point and I was so intent on not hitting the horn and retrieving my apple that my foot relaxed on the brake pedal somewhat and the car unknown to me rolled slowly forward and ended up nudging the car in front of me with a jolt.

So the poor girl in front of me heard this aggressive blast of a horn from this nut behind her and then as if that were not enough, he comes charging down and bashes into her. Why can't he wait at the lights like anyone else? Is he a madman or what? Now he's getting out of the car to come and assault me!!

The only recourse I had was to very sheepishly get out of the car, explain to her I was not a madman, in fact I was quite at peace with the world and wished harm to no-one, to apologise for it all and to wish her a very merry Christmas.

It's so important not to get the wrong message.

When people survey the world around them, or things that are happening in their lives, they very often get the wrong message about God. They conclude that God doesn't care, or is powerless to help or he simply doesn't exist at all.

How easy it is to survey the mayhem that people create on a local or a global scale. We see the agony and the heartache in so many places and say "Why doesn't God do something about all of this?" "Why doesn't He just step in a fix it?"

And on a personal scale there are many in this very congregation who have known loss and some very very hard times. It is only natural that we sometimes ask the question "Why does God allow this to happen to me?"

That is why it is very important not to get the wrong message. God does care and He is ever present and powerful but this is no guarantee against hard times and sometimes, yes even tragedy. God is ever present but He is not the God of the magic wand which He can wave so that everything unpleasant will miraculously go away. Yes God is ever present but the Bible clearly states that He is working amidst a network of selfishness and sometimes downright evil.

That is why we must take the Christmas message with us into the New Year. The birth of Jesus was not all magic and beauty. Having a baby in a makeshift cattle shed far away from home and loved ones would not have been the easiest thing. And let us not forget the very real danger and uncertainty arising from Herod's jealousy and insecurity which led to mass murder and Mary and Joseph taking their young baby all the way down to Egypt. On a donkey across desert terrain – into an unknown and foreign country – how hard that would have been! They were indeed refugees fearing for their lives. But the Christmas message surely is that amidst all these very real hardships and traumas and anxieties that come as part and parcel of everyday living, God was enveloping the whole scene conveying deep joy and a great sense of underlying hope and peace.

That's the message we mustn't get wrong – Emmanuel – God with us no matter what, no matter when, no matter where, no matter how sad, no matter how bleak.

How important it is not to get the wrong message. Though the world often looks hopeless and gloomy, and there is despair as far as the eye

can see – let us remember the Christmas message of Emmanuel. Our God is ever present and is working His purposes out in His own time. Let us remember the message of Emmanuel that can give us peace love hope and joy – a message we need to carry with us into 2024. And let us be thankful for all the godly people who have linked to his power and who are performing miracles each and every day – even as we speak.

Our church, ourselves and yes our attitudes may need revitalising and modernising as we face the ever changing times – but our God does not.

He is still all loving, ever present and full of unbounded grace.

He is alive and well and living very squarely right in the middle of now.

That's the message of Christmas, making the connection in a language we can understand, the message of Emmanuel - let's not get the message wrong.

Amen