

## **Peace.**

Now is the season of advent. It is a time of waiting, a time of expectation, a time of looking forward to an arrival. We as Christians should be thinking about not only the arrival of the baby Jesus in Bethlehem on that first Christmas, but also on the return of Jesus, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

We do fairly well on the first one – in fact, society probably does reasonably well on remembering the birth of Jesus. There may not be too much contemplation of who Jesus is, but there are reminders – you don't have to go far to see nativity scenes. At Westfield Hornsby, there's a nativity scene just around the corner from Santa Claus.

And in all our major shopping centres, they play Christmas Carols that remind us of the birth of Jesus. For every Jingle Bells or White Christmas or All I want for Christmas is you, there seems to be a Silent Night, or a First Nowell or even an O Come All Ye Faithful.

I take heart in that, there's some pretty meaningful lyrics sinking into people's minds even amid the Christmas shopping frenzy.

But the second arrival that we should be thinking about is the return of Jesus – when Jesus will return in glory. And that's not a popular thing to talk about, even in churches. The end of the age is sometimes a scary prospect, even if, in our hearts we know that things can't be put right until God brings this age to an end and gets rid of all that is wrong with the world.

But putting the world right, peace on earth, is the Christmas message. We can get distracted by the cute baby in the manger, the warm glow of lanterns in the stable, the humility of the shepherds, the grandeur of the wise men, the vision of the holy family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus, but the message of Christmas, when you get down to it, is putting the world right. Peace on earth. Goodwill to all people. Joy to the world. God with us.

Jesus birth in Bethlehem is the first part of Jesus' story – a story in which he grew, and taught and healed, and cast out demons and performed great miracles, and would lead him to suffering and to death on the cross.

Jesus' story didn't end there though, because he rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. And neither is Jesus' ascending into heaven the end of the story, despite what some Christmas carols may lead us to believe ("Fit us to heaven to live with you there"). What we wait for is Christ's return – not so much the end of the story, as the completion of the story.

And the third arrival that we should be thinking about is the arrival of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and in our lives and in the life of our church. We should be thinking about how we are being transformed and what we are doing to further the kingdom of God. Whether it's sharing our faith or supporting each other or praying or working in the world or whatever. God is in charge, and will bring about his kingdom – but what we do matters.

And if we look at these three arrivals – the nativity in Bethlehem, the return of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit, they're all good things. We shouldn't be scared or wary of them, as we contemplate them we should be happy. We should feel blessed.

Today's reading from St Paul's letter to the Philippians reflects on that blessing – that blessing that comes from being a follower of Jesus.

Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians, the church in Philippi, which, from the tone of Paul's letter, was doing quite well. Paul's letter is not so much focused admonishing them for what they might be doing wrong, or warning them about doing the wrong thing either, but rather, it's on encouraging the Philippian Christians, and he openly shares his joy and hope in Christ with them.

But despite the joy and hope shared in his letter, we need to remember that Paul was in prison in Rome at the time he wrote it. Which might not have been that bad as 1<sup>st</sup> century prisons go – and he was certainly able to have attendants and send and receive messengers, but he was under arrest, he was deprived of his freedom, and he was, very much in fear for his life.

And verse three says “I thank my God every time I remember you.” Wow. The connection between Paul and the Philippians is profound. He thanks God, not just in general terms and occasionally. But every time he thinks of them. How do we go following his example? It's nice to be part of a congregation, certainly, but do we actually thank God for our Christian sisters and brothers?

And Paul, as verse four tells us, doesn't just thank God for the Philippians, but he prays for them, and we read that he prays for them all. And there is a sense, I think, that he's not only praying for them all as a group, but he's also praying for them all as individuals. So, if we are to follow Paul's example we shouldn't just be giving thanks for our congregation here, but we should be praying for each member.

And Paul's prayers aren't simply prayers of intercession where he brings particular concerns before God, but he always prays with joy. Joy for what God has done, joy for what God is doing, joy for what God will do. We often pray in sadness or in obligation or in need, but we should be sharing our joy with God – just as we share our joy with people that we love.

And the joy that Paul has with the Philippians is in their partnership in the gospel (v5). Partnership in the gospel – having heard the good news they share the good news. With each other, and with people outside as well. And the good news, the gospel, is the story of Jesus. The kingdom of God coming near. Immanuel – God with us. The “official visit” – the advent of Jesus.

And as well as his joy, Paul shares his hope. Not a vague hope that something might happen, or that things will work out in the end, but a hope he's confident in. As the traditional words tell us – “a sure and certain hope”. From verse six: being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

What Paul is looking forward to is not simply “the future”, or “better times” or even “the age to come”, but the day of Christ Jesus. It is something that will happen. A definite event. The time, the day, when, as the Nicene Creed reminds us Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end. There will be true and lasting – everlasting – peace.

And these things aren't things that Paul struggles to do, or even feels some obligation to do, but he says “It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me”( 1:7)

It is right, it is natural, it is the outworking of the Holy Spirit within us. Paul and the Philippians were the community of Christ, just as we are today. It is right that we should love and support each other. It is natural that we should pray with joy for each other.

Paul says “God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.” (1:8) He’s not actually calling on God as a witness here, and it doesn’t seem that the Philippians need such an assurance. (“I really like you – cross my heart!”) But from time to time in Paul’s letters – in Romans, 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians – he uses that expression when he is being very emotional.

And Paul’s emotion is intense here: He claims the affection of Christ Jesus for them – he loves them, just as Jesus loved them. Wow.

So we know that Paul prays, but what is his prayer?

Well, he tells us in verse nine: ...this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.

Love. And knowledge and depth of insight. Love comes first.

And the reason that he prays for those things is given in verse 10 and 11 “ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.”

It’s true for us, too. As we grow in love and wisdom, we are better able to discern what is best: we are more likely to get things right, we become better ambassadors for Jesus. We are less likely to do the wrong thing and tarnish the reputation of the church.

We are saved by Jesus, by the grace of Jesus, and the response to that grace is to be gracious too. As we pray in the Lord’s Prayer each week “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us”.

Now is the season of advent. When we remember God sending his son to us, as a child born in humble circumstances. A child who would live and die and rise again and ascend to heaven.

And we remember the return of Jesus. When he will return in glory and God’s plan for creation will be fulfilled. Where, as John tells us in the book of Revelation, “He will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away.” (Rev 21:4)

People often lament the ‘commercialisation of Christmas’, and long for the ‘spirit of Christmas’ or the ‘true meaning of Christmas’. And who can forget Bert Newton’s 1981 hit “Bring back the spirit of Christmas”?

I think that misses the point, and we are in danger of replacing commercialism with sentimentality.

I don’t think the commercialisation of Christmas is the problem. The problem is people. The problem is us. In these weeks leading up to Christmas, we focus on trying to achieve perfection for Christmas. The perfect decorations, the perfect family gatherings, the perfect events, the perfect presents. And I suspect that these things never work out quite as perfectly as we planned.

In these weeks leading up to Christmas, we need to remember, and to celebrate the season of Advent. Remember to celebrate the presence of God with us in Jesus.

Don't let Christmas – with its commercialism and sentimentality distract us from God. And I don't say that in a mean way – we should be having parties and presents and gatherings and decorations: they are all good things, but they're not the main thing.

Whatever your plans are this Christmas, wherever you are and whatever you're doing, make sure you remember the peace that Jesus offers you, the peace that he brought into the world that first Christmas, and that you come to know the joy and peace in believing that Paul knew and that Paul shared with the Philippians.

Amen