

Saturday 24 December, 2022

A sermon preached at St Paul's Cathedral by the Dean of Melbourne at the Christmas Eve Eucharist, 2022

Just after the end of the Second World War, so the story goes, the BBC World Service was putting together an international Christmas special and asked a number of diplomatic representatives based in London what it was that they were hoping for as a Christmas gift that year. The French Ambassador wished for 'Peace on earth and happiness through all the world'. The Soviet Ambassador said he'd not really be celebrating Christmas but if he had to wish for a gift, it would be 'Freedom for all people enslaved by capitalist imperialism'. The Australian High Commissioner was delighted to be asked, and told the reporter: 'Good on you for asking, mate. I'd love a box of fresh cherries and a bottle of Shiraz'.

Christmas is a time of gifts. Both the material gifts that we give and receive over these next few days, like boxes of cherries or bottles of Shiraz, and the immaterial gifts that we long for, like freedom and peace. The reason why we give gifts at this time, is because God gave us the greatest of all gifts. In giving us his Son to be born as a vulnerable baby in Bethlehem, God gave us the gift of himself. And because we have received the gift of his own Son, he invites us to give gifts ourselves: the gift of who we are, giving our talents and skills in his service, and the material gifts we share in celebration of his birth.

It was during the reign of Caesar Augustus, we read in our gospel reading, that God's greatest gift came into the world. His mother, Mary, had been told by an angel that God would gift the world a Saviour, and that she would become the mother of God. 'You will conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus'—which means Saviour—the angel Gabriel had told the startled Mary in her hometown of Nazareth (Lk 1.31). Mary asked how this could be; she had only just been engaged, and she was still a virgin. And the angel told her that the power of God's Holy Spirit would accomplish this miraculous birth: 'the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the

Son of God', the angel said (1.32). And Mary assented to God's will for her: 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word', she said (1.38).

A Roman imperial census had brought Mary and her husband from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Caesar Augustus, who imposed peace on his realms by suppressing all conflict, sought to register all his people, for the purposes of maintaining the armies that kept troublemakers from rebellion. As people came to pay the poll tax that funded the armies who kept up Augustus' fragile peace, another kind of census was underway, away from the sight of any officials. Through the words of the psalmist God had promised that he, too, would register his people: not to provide army fodder to keep up a prince's semblance of peace, but to bring true peace. All those who loved God would be registered and recorded in this census (Ps 87.6). None of those who loved God would be forgotten, when he gifted the world the true Prince of Peace. And now the time had been fulfilled, and God's gift of peace was made known to the world, in the birth of his Son.

In the middle of the night, as the world lay asleep, Christ was born in Bethlehem, in a shelter for farm animals. Unrecognised by anyone important, God's Son was laid in a feeding trough. God's gift to the world was laid among sheep, oxen and donkeys because, as the prophet Isaiah had foretold, 'the ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand' (Isa 1.3). Away from the city, only shepherds, some of the least regarded in society, heard the angels' song, announcing that God's greatest gift had come into the world. Guarding their flocks, they saw heaven opened, and the angels of God descending, praising God and singing. 'God gives those whom he loves his gift of peace', the angels sang. 'Give God the glory in heaven and on earth', they told the shepherds, as they explained the significance of this birth (Lk 2.14).

The true Prince of Peace had come to bring a peace that passes all understanding. Not the kind of peace that suppresses conflict—the peace of the Roman empire that brutally killed its opponents—but the peace that restores what has been broken, the peace that brings healing. A peace that radically changes our relationship with God and which, out of that profound inner change, transforms the relationships we have with one another. The child Jesus, swaddled tight for the winter chill in bands of cloths, was God's gift to the world, bringing his peace and love to heaven and earth. Heaven would no longer be shut, because Jesus Christ, the 'Saviour, the

Messiah and Lord' had been born a human child. God had come close to his people, was among them, living with them as 'Immanuel, God with us' (Mt 1.23).

The Shepherds did not keep the good news of this incredible birth a secret, but left the manger to share it with others. They awakened the city, singing the praises of God. They told people how they had seen the light of salvation: the light that interrupted the darkness of their night; its brilliance a promise that God's saving power would bring an end to the darkness of the world. In their enthusiasm to share the news of the birth of the Saviour, the very people who had received God's gift to them became a gift themselves. The shepherds had seen that it was true that God was born a child, so that all people could become children of God. They had heard the heavenly song of love and peace and witnessed the signs of God's peace—finding God's child lying in a manger. And through that witness they themselves had become a gift: people who share the good news of God's gift of peace with others.

People who have seen God's glory in the gift of his Son, may themselves become a gift to others. By opening their hearts to God's good news, by looking for glimpses of God's glory right where they are, and by telling others about what they have found and felt, they may themselves become gifts. People who have experienced God's peace in their lives, may become a gift to others by working for that peace in our world. Each one of us who, in our own lives, has come to know the profound peace that God gifts those who love him, is invited to become a gift to others who are still searching for that incredible gift that God gave our world that first Christmas.

If you have yet to find God's gift of peace in your lives, then tonight may be a good time, and this Cathedral a good place, to open your hearts to that precious gift. You may do so by placing your trust in the child in the manger—the Lord Jesus Christ who, by his life and death, wrought that peace for us and who, by his glorious resurrection and ascension, transformed suffering and overcame death. And if you already trust and believe in the new-born Christ child, and know God's peace in your lives, then tonight is a good opportunity to recommit yourselves to making the good news that God seeks all people to share his peace and love known to others. Tonight is a good time to allow yourselves to become a gift yourself.

I said at the beginning that Christmas was a time of gifts. This season we share gifts with one another, because we ourselves have received the greatest gift of them all: God's peace and love, shown forth in the gift of his Son, the true Prince of Peace. God's light and life, breaking heaven open and illumining a newborn baby's humble manger. We become gifts ourselves, when we invite others to discover for themselves the precious gift of his Son God has graciously given us this night. We become gifts ourselves, when we share the best we are with others. This Christmas, as you give and receive gifts, give thanks to God who gifts us himself, in his Son Jesus. This Christmas, pray for God's strength so that we may work for the peace he longs to share with this world. This Christmas, pray for God's grace so that we may gift ourselves in service of those whom he loves.