



**Friday Week Two of Advent (Year A)
Archdiocesan Staff Christmas Mass 2022**

Homily

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Archbishop of Perth**

**Friday 9 December 2022
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

I am very fortunate to have a generous niece who each year renews a subscription to Netflix for me as a kind of combined Christmas-birthday present.

Just recently my niece, whose name is Jacqui, sent me a message listing all the Christmas movies that are available on Netflix at the moment. While I certainly don't have time to watch them all, I have seen enough of them to know that they all seem to follow a similar story line: it usually runs something like this. A high-powered, ambitious and well-paid executive, working in a large firm in a big American city, returns home to the little town in which they grew up, and from which they could not get away quickly enough once they had finished their education. More often than not, this person is returning home with hopes of healing a broken heart because the person they loved and whom they hoped to marry had in one way or another betrayed them.

Once they get back to their little town they fall in love again with the simplicity, the slow pace and the gentle kindness of the townspeople who, of course, are also keen to help them find a new partner. Inevitably they do meet someone, they fall in love, then a crisis arrives because of a misunderstanding, and it looks like all is lost. But then, almost miraculously, something happens to clear up the misunderstanding, and all ends well as they kiss under the mistletoe and the film's credits start to roll.

There is something simple and gentle and soothing about these movies, even if there is a certain sameness about them, which can begin to become irritating after a while. They are, of course, also idealistic and unrealistic because people's lives are never quite this simple and do not work out always as well as these movies would like us to believe.

It is, of course, no accident that these movies are all set within the context of a small-town Christmas celebration. There is, in many people's minds, a certain romanticism about Christmas which lends itself to the idea that there will always be a happy ending.

We Christians are not immune from the temptation to turn Christmas into a romantic and sentimental celebration. The Christmas story itself, at least on the surface, can lead us in this



direction. There is the tiny, helpless, fragile baby, born in the stable, with the light of the bright star shining down from the heavens, with wise men arriving with precious gifts, and with shepherds, rushing in with news of angels singing with joy out in the fields.

It is right that we should be captivated by the beauty of this story, but we should also be clear-eyed about the realities of which it speaks. Mary and Joseph were forced from their home in order to comply with a legally imposed order regarding a census of the population ordered by a despised occupying power. Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem but could find nowhere to stay and were forced to prepare for the birth of their child in what could only be described as squalid circumstances. The shepherds who came to the stable were people who were regarded by their society as outsiders, crude uneducated peasants, who were not to be trusted. The wise men who brought precious gifts for the child also brought a warning that this small family should escape immediately and rush to Egypt because the life of the child was at risk. There is, therefore, nothing particularly romantic or sentimental about this story. It is quite the opposite.

As we approach the end of the second week of Advent, the liturgy of the Church has not yet turned our attention to the story of this first coming of Jesus amongst us. Rather, it continues to invite us to reflect on the second coming of Jesus. Our natural tendency is to see Christmas, from a religious point of view, as a time to look back to something wonderful that happened two thousand years ago. It is that of course - something wonderful did happen. But even more it is an invitation to look forward to the time when the Lord will return. He will encounter us in all his glory, the glory of his love, and encountering him we will inevitably be made aware, and perhaps painfully aware, of the gap between the extraordinary generosity, goodness and love of God towards us and the often meagre and even miserly nature of our response to God.

This is the point of both readings today. They invite us, in different ways, to reflect on our response to God: the response we have made up to now; the response we are making at this present time in our lives; and the response we hope to make or realise we are called to make to God as we move into the future. Are we going to be like the people in today's Gospel who judged both John the Baptist and Jesus himself on the basis of what they, the people, wanted these two great figures to be rather than on the reality that both John and, of course, much more so Jesus, were men of God sent to reveal to God's people the path he was calling them to follow. Today's gospel points to a frightening inability or unwillingness on the part of the people to recognise Jesus as the Son of God, and respond to him with openness, acceptance and honesty. And it is the very same issue which is identified in today's first reading. *"If only,"* the prophet cries out, *"you had eyes to see the gift which God was offering you – how much happier your life would be"*.

This is the real challenge of Advent. It is a time, as John the Baptist says, to prepare the way for the Lord. It is a time to ask the Lord for the gift of fresh eyes and new vision, so that we can recognise him, not only in the baby who was born two thousand years ago, but also in the day-to-day reality of our own lives. At Christmas we remember that Jesus is our Emmanuel - *God with*



us. Let us open our eyes in order to see him; let us open our ears in order to hear him; let us open our hearts in order to love him; and let us open our hands in order to serve him.