



CHRISTMAS MESSAGE 2019

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As we celebrate Christmas 2019, we look back on a year that has brought many challenges for us all. Some of those challenges are deeply personal and private to each one of us; others, I am sure, reflect our concerns for the society in which we live and the Church to which we belong. This is true every year, of course. We are all richly gifted, but still flawed and imperfect people. We live in what is often called the “lucky country” but that luck, or rather the rich blessings of Australia, are not shared by everyone. And we belong to Christ’s Church, the Church he promised to be with until the end of time, but a Church which is made of up frail and sinful people who can so easily turn their backs - our backs - on the presence of the Lord among us.

This season of Advent, and celebration of the birth of Jesus at Christmas, present us with an opportunity to celebrate all the richness with which God fills our lives, but also to acknowledge the many ways in which we fail to make good use of the blessings God offers us. Christmas can be a time of renewal, a celebration of our faith and most importantly, a reminder of the immense love God has for each one of us. All of this, of course, is focused on the person of Jesus, God among us as one of us.

In his first homily as Pope, St John Paul II, who was canonised just five years ago, appealed to those listening not to be afraid to welcome Christ into their lives and accept his love and his grace.

“Do not be afraid,” the Pope said. *“Open wide the doors for Christ.” He alone knows what is in you – he alone knows it.*

The words *“Do not be afraid”* run like a refrain through the whole of the Christmas story. They are the words spoken to Zechariah when an angel appears to him to tell him that he and his wife, even in their old age, are to have a son who will become known as John the Baptist. The same words are spoken to Mary when the angel Gabriel is sent to ask her to be the mother of the saviour. Joseph hears those words when he is reassured that he should accept Mary as his wife, and the shepherds hear them when they are told of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

Throughout the course of his life Jesus will constantly reassure his disciples with the same words. And when he appears to them after his resurrection his first words are *“do not be afraid”*.



In a sense these words are easy to say, but not always easy to believe. When they were spoken to Mary by the Angel Gabriel, they were a response to Mary's fear and her confusion as she was confronted by what God was asking of her. The words only made sense to her when she listened to some further words of the angel: *the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow*. Believing those words, Mary was finally able to give her "yes" to God's plan. It was because she realised that she could rely on God rather than on herself that Mary could say, *I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let what you have said be done to me*.

What was true for Mary can also be true for us. Even though Christmas can be a busy time it does present us with an opportunity for reflection on who we are individually as Christians and together as a Christian community at the service of our wider society. If Saint John Paul II is right, and it is only Christ who fully knows us, both in our giftedness and our brokenness, then time spent with him, celebrating his birth and all that flows from it, will be richly rewarding. We will know ourselves to be deeply loved by God and this realisation, as it grows within us, will be the source of that inner peace about which our Christmas carols so often speak.

At the same time we will become more and more conscious of the privilege and responsibility we have of being signs and bearers of God's love for others. The beauty of our faith is a gift to be shared, not a possession to be hoarded. As we share this gift, through the witness of our lives and the practical care we show for those in need, we will be together the living sign of the Lord's ongoing presence in the world. In this way too we will experience that true peace that only God can give.

Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ. As he once came to Bethlehem so long ago he comes again today. We will celebrate his coming at Christmas. May our eyes be open to recognise his face. May our ears be open to hear his voice. May our hearts be open to welcome him with love.

I pray that this time of Advent and Christmas will bring you, your families and your friends great joy, that the new-born Christ will keep you all safe, and that you have a happy and holy Christmas and a peaceful beginning to the year which lies ahead.

Happy Christmas.

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