

Along the track

A Christmas Blessing

So much of our Christmas imagery comes from the northern hemisphere, Christmas in a cold climate – the snow, the tinsel, the reindeer, minus temperatures, sparkling snow covered trees, quiet stillness, real Christmas trees, mulled wine, eggnog, snowmen, fire places and the list goes on! We listen to songs like "I'm dreaming of a White Christmas", "Frosty the Snowman", "Let it Snow" and "Winter Wonderland".

I am reminded of one very Australian Christmas story, written in verse by John Hartigan of Around the Boree Log fame. When the Bishop came for confirmation, he questioned the children about their faith:

Come, tell me, boy,' his lordship said, in crushing tones severe,
'Come, tell me why is Christmas Day the greatest of the year?
'How is it that around the world we celebrate that day
'And send a name upon a card to those who're far away?
'Why is it wandering ones return with smiles and greetings, too?
A squall of knowledge hit the lad from Tangmalangmaloo.
He gave a lurch which set a-shake the vases on the shelf,
He knocked the benches all askew, up-ending of himself.
And oh, how pleased his lordship was, and how he smiled to say,
'That's good, my boy. Come, tell me now; and what is Christmas Day?
The ready answer bared a fact no bishop ever knew -
'It's the day before the races out at Tangmalangmaloo'.

I have never been to Tangmalangmaloo but so many small country communities thrived on such events before and after Christmas. I know because I came from one of them. Christmas was a very special time – the school Christmas break up which virtually everyone in the district attended, the pre-Christmas outings, the shopping, midnight Mass, the celebration of Christmas at home and then the Boxing Day sporting events. Our family had the Post Office, a back room in the house, so we saw everyone in the district at least weekly but, at Christmas time, they came every day because Christmas cards were such a big feature of the season. People near and far kept in touch in that way.

Gifts were not a big part of our Christmas celebration, in fact I think they petered out when I was about seven. But the dinner was important and those meals remain one of my fondest and most enduring memories. They were very special, not just because it was the only time in the year when we ate chicken, but the family was all together. Stories were shared and plans made and we didn't have to go out and work on the farm, except to keep a keen eye out for any smoke on the horizon.

I still remember one card which we received every year for quite a number of years – the picture on the front may have been different but the message inside was not:

I didn't ask for wealth or fame (I knew you wouldn't mind). I asked for priceless treasures rare of a much more lasting kind. I prayed that God would be near to you at the start of each new day, to grant you health and blessing and friends to share your way. I asked for happiness for you in all things great and small, but that you'd know God's loving care I prayed for most of all.

My Christmas memories may be from a different era but some things stay the same. Christmas celebrations can help us grasp something of how deeply we are loved by God. We feel that in the love of our parents, our partner, our children, our brothers and sisters, we feel that love in our celebrations, in all those moments of wonder in our life, but we can feel it too in the most menial and ordinary, the everyday greetings and acts of kindness - in all these we are being loved by God.

Celebrating Emmanuel, God being with us isn't just about Bethlehem, the Stable and the Crib – it is about the Incarnation, how Jesus became one of us so that we become like him, so that the grace and life of God might flow through us and inspire us, so that we too might bring that love into our world. When we wish each other a Happy Christmas, it is more than wishing joy but wishing for those things that will make us truly happy, for those things that will bring us peace.

Theologian Karl Rahner wrote:

God says to the world: "I am there. I am with you. I am your life. I am there. I no longer go away from this world, even if you do not see me now. I am there. It is Christmas. Light the candles. They have more right to exist than all the darkness. It is Christmas. Christmas that lasts forever."

So this Christmas.

May God always be near to you and you near to God.
May you always be grateful for the gift of your life and for the hidden treasures it contains.

May the bonds of love for one another be strengthened as you gather with your family and friends around the table.

May the wonder and awe that fills the eyes of children lead you to a renewed awareness and appreciation of whatever you too easily take for granted.

May you be blessed with good friends and may you be a good friend to others.
May you always be ready to forgive.

May the coming year be one of good health for you.
May you experience the peace which only Christ can give.

Regards
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