

Christmas: Festival of Enchantment

Sermon for Christmas Day, 2021, First Eucharist of the Day

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Isaiah 62: 6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3: 4-8a; Luke 2: 1-20

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

The Australian essayist Donald Horne once wrote that we have two defining festivals in this country: Anzac Day, the celebration of nationhood, and Christmas, the celebration of family. I'd go a step further, suggesting that Anzac Day celebrates courage and resilience in the face of tragic necessity, while Christmas celebrates enchantment.

We see that enchantment in the faces of children opening gifts on Christmas morning, in our Christmas customs and music, in the figure of Santa and the whole tradition of gift giving, in the joy of families reunited and loved ones held close. In particular we see it in the Christmas stories that Holy Church still tells, like the one we just heard from Luke's Gospel—of a wonderful birth in a stable, of God suddenly come to his people, of shepherds filled with terror and wonder at the Angelic message, and all this while the sober, important business of the Roman Empire was going on all around, with the mighty global power registering its people for taxation and land and conscription purposes. Likewise, today we celebrate Christmas as a break from the serious business of earning a living and making our way in the world, not to mention dealing with wider events—with the pandemic, with housing and employment challenges, with climate change looming, with an election coming, and with plenty of bad news from all directions.

Courage and resilience in the face of tragic necessity will always be required of us, as it is in Devonport right now where tragedy did its best to steal Christmas. But our strong appetite for enchantment remains. Christian writers like C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, with their beloved tales of Narnia and of Middle Earth, knew that enchantment was mandatory for a proper understanding of our world, and at the heart of what they offered was the good news of God come among us and evil overcome.

Even without Christian faith, people crave the enchantment of knowing that there's more to life than tragic necessity. There's J.K. Rowling and her boy wizard Harry Potter, for example, along with all those books, films and video games in the hugely popular fantasy genre. Science fiction, too, meets a need for enchantment, with the *Star Wars* franchise a standout.

And if the demands of adult political responsibility and good citizenship are too much for us, we can always luxuriate in the fantasy world of conspiracy theories, convinced that paedophile cannibals are really in charge of America, or that its presidential election was stolen, or that your COVID jab is really putting mind controlling nanobots into your bloodstream. Clearly, there's good enchantment and bad enchantment, as every little girl who loves *Snow White* will tell you.

Friends, at Christmas we have the good enchantment. Serious economists and business leaders might like to consider that the exchange of gifts reveals a generosity and solidarity and sense of

mutuality that takes us much deeper than rational economic actors and the exchange of contracts. The wonder on children's faces shows us what many careworn adults have lost and yearn to recover. The stubborn taste for enchantment is a reminder that resilience and courage in the face of tragic necessity can't be the whole story.

For some it is, of course, and like Scrooge they have no time for enchantment. "Bah, humbug." But for us let's trust our spiritual instincts and go along with it. Let's return to the heart of our Western world's fund of enchantment, where God and sinners are reconciled, where heaven smiles on earth and the shepherds rejoice, where the important people at the inn miss out on the wonder that's dawning out back in the stable, where the savage Pax Romana is being quietly outdone by the enchanting peace of an infant and his blessed mother. They testify to a wonderful alternative reality, an enchanted world that we enter whenever priest and people gather to celebrate the Eucharist together.

The demand for courage and resilience in the face of tragic necessity is never far away, but if we hold onto that other crucial reality, which is enchantment, then we need never take that tragedy with ultimate seriousness—or death, or the power of evil. That's the message of Easter: God's great protest against brute reality and God's summons for us join in with it. And we have a foretaste of that enchanted life in the stories of Christmas. "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

The Lord be with you ...