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CHRISTMAS MESSAGES FROM AUSTRALIAN CHURCH LEADERS

“... in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” Hebrew 1:2 TEV

The message from our government and business community this Christmas is: “Spend up big for the sake of the country.” Will we be rich or poor? This seems to be the ultimate economic question. No matter how well off we become we still fear losing it all.

On the one hand we must save for the future. On the other we must spend as much as we can for the present, and Christmas is given as the reason. The message seems to be how we manage our economy and provide for ourselves.

But that’s not the message. Christmas is about our God who is incredibly generous, loving, and unreasonably extravagant toward human beings. Christmas says ‘thank you’ for his astonishing daily gifts. God has spent up big on us, and he continues to spend up big.

Christmas is a Christian festival that celebrates a divine life, the life of God’s Son, born in the most unlikely circumstances, and given for the sake of the world. There is no greater gift, freely given, that once received lasts for eternity.

Celebrate and spend this Christmas, if it’s good for the economy. But even better, say thank you to God, because that’s good for the soul and for your life.

*Revd John Henderson, General Secretary
National Council of Churches in Australia*

(NB. In the Western Church, Christmas is celebrated on December 25. Most Orthodox Churches will celebrate the Feast of the Nativity on January 7, 2008.)

Anglican Church of Australia

This Christmas the talk around the dinner table will probably be very different from last year. The world has changed quite dramatically in 2008 and many people fear for their future.

But spare a thought for those in real poverty. In Australia we might be limiting our spending on Christmas gifts but today more than 1.4 billion people live on less than \$1.25 a day. That is extreme poverty.

This Christmas I urge people everywhere to take time out to give thanks for what we have and for our standard of living here in Australia. We should all reflect on those who we should be reaching out to, those in desperate need, those who can't afford a meal let alone presents.

I am reminded of the words in Mathew 25. 'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you invited me in; naked and you clothed me.' In this parable the righteous queried Jesus saying they could not remember doing those things. 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to me.'

*Archbishop Dr Phillip Aspinall, Primate
Anglican Church of Australia*

Armenian Apostolic Church

St Paul spoke of *love* as the greatest spiritual gift cited with *faith* and *hope*. At the advent of the holy season, as we celebrate the Holy Nativity and Theophany of Our Lord Jesus Christ let it be a time of reflection on how we use these spiritual gifts to impact our own lives and those around us.

Faith is the foundation and content of God's message fulfilled in the incarnation of the Son of God. When we live a life of faith we are blessed with a life of direction and purpose. Live with *faith*.

Hope is the attitude and focus which brings solace to our lives when we trust the Word of God and are assured that God will fulfil all promises as He fulfilled His promise to send the Messiah. Live with *hope*.

And *love*, the greatest of the trilogy of spiritual gifts is the action by which God calls us to live. Honestly evaluate your heart today and make it a priority to live with *love*.

We can look forward to a fuller and more meaningful life only when we live with *faith, hope* and *love* in Christ.

“Christ is born and revealed. Blessed is the revelation of Christ.”

Archbishop Aghan Baliozian, Primate

Diocese of the Armenian Church of Australia and New Zealand

AOG in Australia/Australian Christian Churches

I often try to picture what the very first Christmas would have looked like. And can I tell you; the night that Jesus arrived in Bethlehem was no peaceful, silent night! In fact, the town of Bethlehem was facing a crisis of their own. In a city overrun with people, crowded streets, new rulers, and uncertain futures...a baby was born. And He looked nothing like a King. It was majesty in the midst of the everyday.

Christmas is a fantastic time of year, and yet this season can become overwhelming at times. The good news is that 2000 years ago, our God showed us His love by bringing peace in the midst of chaos.

Friends, as tensions and financial pressures begin to rise around the globe, let us not forget that the birth of Christ came in the midst of chaos, but left us with a promise of hope for the future.

In a profound moment before He departed from this world Christ said, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I now give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." (John 14:27)

The peace of Christmas is not merely about the absence of conflict and pressures. Jesus was not born into a peaceful situation, and yet He IS peace. No matter what circumstances you face today, may you find hope and rest in the midst of uncertainty, and hold fast to the knowledge that Jesus himself left His peace with you.

May you and your family be blessed this Christmas Season.

Merry Christmas

Pastor Brian Houston, Senior Pastor, Hillsong Church, &
National President, Australian Christian Churches

Baptist Union of Australia

One of the great personal pursuits of our time is a sense of self worth and acceptance. This quest is often pursued through people, possessions, power, and prestige, which ultimately prove to be inadequate sources for personal significance.

Christmas is good news because its true message declares and demonstrates that we have *eternal* worth and value. So great was our personal value to God that he showed it to the world: *'for God so loved the world that He gave us His son.'*

While Christmas can rightly be understood as relating to concerns with peace, goodwill, and forgiveness, more centrally it is a demonstration of the great love of God for humanity, in action. Eugene Peterson in the Message Bible puts it simply: *"And this sublime Word became flesh and blood and moved into our neighbourhood."* God came *close to us* in Jesus. He entered our neighbourhood, which is not always a place of harmony and peace, but a place representing real human life and struggle. The good news of Christmas is that God still comes close to us.

The simple truth remains: *You are loved, - do not be afraid.* An engineering professor asked his class what was the most important thing to *come out of a mine.* After several minutes of discussion and answers about fossil fuels and other elements mined from the earth, the wise professor said: "The most important thing to come out of a mine *is the miner!*" So too the most important thing to come out of Christmas is Christ – *for unto you is born this day a Saviour which is Christ the Lord.*

Have a very happy Christmas knowing you are greatly loved by God.

*Revd Dr John Beasy, President
Baptist Union of Australia*

Baptist Union of Australia

It's time to claim back Christmas! Once a solemn Christian memorial to the birth of Jesus, for many Australians it's devolved into a retail festival that misses the point. Cheer and good will give way to frenzied activity, congested traffic, endless queues and financial worry.

Many approach Christmas like Tattoo, the basset hound, inadvertently taken for a ride by his owners when his leash was caught in their car door. Fortunately a policeman saw it and pulled the car over, but not before Tattoo reached speeds of 30kph, rolling over several times! Maybe our 'leash' is caught in the door of Christmas commercialism and hype.

It doesn't have to be this way. We can reclaim Christmas.

Maybe this Christmas we focus less on food and self-indulgence and more on recalibrating our lives with the God who loved the world so much that he sent his son to save us. Let's decide to make the main thing the main thing this Christmas; less presents, more wonder and worship.

And as we focus more on Jesus this Christmas let's allow his values to shape our own. Perhaps the best gifts to give this year are less expensive, but worth a whole lot: showing hospitality to a homeless person, or a donation to a charity, or maybe something as simple as repairing a rift with an estranged family member. Christmas need not be expensive for it to be profound.

The Baptist Churches of Australia pray this Christmas will be our best ever as we capture again its true meaning. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believed in him might not perish, but have everlasting life."* (John 3:16)

Rev Dr Brian Winslade, National Director
Baptist Union of Australia

Catholic Church in Australia

One of the interesting aspects of the world economic crisis is how it seems to have surprised so many people, including the economic experts, in its size and scale. Day after day, pages of newsprint and hours of broadcast time are devoted to analysis of what went wrong and how it can be rectified. All of us, from the Chairman of the US Federal Reserve to the person on the street, are trying to make sense of it all.

One thing we do know about this crisis is that it affects us all in varying ways. As stocks crash, businesses and industries fail, governments seek to respond and individuals and families tighten the purse strings to prepare for what looks like a bumpy road ahead. Many people have watched the bottom fall out of their retirement nest-egg, others have had savings locked up by financial institutions and, even as interest rates fall, families are keeping a wary eye on their job security and their mortgage commitments.

Charities and social service providers are also feeling it. A recent report from Access Economics for Catholic Social Services Australia, Anglicare Australia, the Salvation Army and UnitingCare Australia examined the impact of the global financial crisis on social services. It found that the crisis will have an acute impact on the most disadvantaged members of society, as well as pushing increasing numbers of low and middle income earners to seek the services of already stretched welfare agencies. The report says that with unemployment expected to rise next year, the services most immediately affected by the deteriorating economic conditions include: employment, housing, financial and general counselling and emergency relief.

And so this Christmas, a general feeling of uncertainty prevails. Perhaps more than ever, we are all seeking the traditional blessings of the Christmas season – joy, peace and goodwill to all people. Much of the anxiety we might feel about the global economic crisis comes about because we know we cannot control it.

The decisions that will be made to deal with this global situation will be made by others, but they will affect our lives. This Christmas, Christians all over the world will draw strength from knowing that far from being an anonymous cog in the economic machinery, each human being is precious beyond understanding, having been individually created, known, and loved by God. Indeed, God loves us so much that he became human.

And when God became human he was not born into a situation of wealth or prestige. He didn't earn multi-million dollar bonuses in the sub-prime mortgage or hedge fund industry of his day. Jesus Christ was born of a lowly maiden in a stable and raised by a carpenter. And yet despite these humble beginnings, Jesus Christ had a profound impact on the world and continues to be present in people's lives today.

This Christmas, I pray that all people of goodwill will take a fresh look at the face of the Christ-child. When we welcome Jesus into our hearts and into our lives, we begin to make sense of the things happening around us. Hope, joy and peace begin to take the edges off our anxiety and fear, and goodwill and generosity to our neighbour in need will surely flow.

May the hope, peace and joy of Christmas be with you all.

Archbishop Philip Wilson, President, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
Catholic Church

Churches of Christ in Australia

Over many years, many Christmas sermons and homilies have focused on the need to "put Christ back into *Christmas*". And, as we have listened to such sermons, we mark the tide of materialism that reaches a flood at Christmas. There is an overwhelming sense that we, as disciples of Jesus, are fighting an "Empire of materialism". Against such an Empire, our attitude is often one of resignation.

We need to look back in order to have hope for the future.

During the 1st century, as the Roman Empire reached dizzying heights of power and prestige, there came into the world a child born of a virgin in a small village named Bethlehem. Long foretold but still unlooked for, the world seemed to spin unmoved by His birth. Empires appeared to be intact. Yet the child grew. A man developed. The Messiah, the incarnation of God, walked amongst us. Life by life he replaced a transitory Empire with an unshakeable Kingdom. Then, through His death and resurrection, He opened the door for all to have eternal citizenship in His Kingdom.

When we ponder the Empires we find ourselves in at Christmas, let us remember Jesus. His presence is sometimes only birthed in small, unnoticed actions. It is our part as citizens of His Kingdom to perform such actions, His to transform Empires with them.

*Craig Brown, Federal Coordinator
Churches of Christ in Australia*

Coptic Orthodox Church

The Feast of the Nativity 2008

It is my pleasure to wish all of you a blessed Feast of the Nativity in which we celebrate the Incarnation of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Today we rejoice because of the birth of Emmanuel our God. St. Matthew the Evangelist wrote that the name Emmanuel means God is with us, as a fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy, "*Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel, which is translated, God with us.*" (*Matthew 1:23; Isaiah 7:14*). Today, we rejoice because God is with us.

God wishes to be with man, because He loves him and said, "*My delight was with the sons of men.*" (*Proverbs 8:31*). In His love for man God created him out of nothing and gave him the grace of being. Furthermore, He created man in His image and likeness.

The entire history of humanity revolves around God's presence with man; it is the story of God's love for man, as well as the story of eternal life, as it is written in the Holy Bible regarding the Heavenly Jerusalem, "*Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.*" (*Revelation 21:3*).

Our feeling that Emmanuel is with us, that is to say God is with us, is what gives us courage, so we can say with the Psalmist, "*The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?*" (*Psalms 118:6*).

Let us rejoice today, because our God Emmanuel is with us. Our joy will be even greater when we are with Him.

Let us joyfully present to God repentant hearts, so He can dwell within us and we can be confirmed in Him and He in us.

Let us pray that the Lord may grant us to feel that we are always in His presence, leading us to a life of holiness and righteousness.

May God bless Australia, its government and its people. Wishing you and your families a blessed Christmas and a joyful 2009.

Bishop Daniel

Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of NSW, QLD & NT

Lutheran Church of Australia

Among the things being said to us this Christmas, for many, the financial market crash across the globe may well be telling us not to take our many blessings for granted. Even more than that. Our blessings only reach their potential when they are used to benefit those around us and those who need us.

It is a scriptural principal that ‘moth and rust’ can quickly erode earthly investment and security.

Our current financial crisis is a reminder we do not live in isolation. We are all members of the human family with one economy.

It is significant that God’s gift of his son Jesus the Christ at Christmas is to be offered to all.

When fear takes over and blame is directed at big business, governments and banks, what the world needs is for all of us to admit to our own part in this financial dilemma in which we too have been idolaters placing earthly gifts in front of the heavenly gifts.

God’s gift of his son in the child of Bethlehem is the treasure that is eternal.

Let Christmas be for all of us a celebration that God is not abandoning us, but giving us new starts and a new hope with a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.

*Revd Dr Mike Semmler, President
Lutheran Church of Australia*

Presbyterian Church of Australia

Our youngest daughter has just had her first child. Tiny. Helpless. Utterly dependent. Profoundly loved. They called him Sebastian, because they liked the name.

2000 years ago, another little one was born. In Bethlehem. They certainly didn't have the facilities our daughter enjoyed. Did they even have a midwife?

They called him Jesus. They knew why too. Not just because they liked the name. His name means "The LORD God saves!" They actually called him that. Jesus.

They also knew their own Scriptures. How a Messiah would come. A Deliverer. They knew that his other names were Wonderful. Counsellor. Almighty God.

And there he lay. Being nurtured at his mother's breast. Jesus. God!

The apostle Paul would later say of Him, "He is before all things. All things were created by Him and for Him. God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through Him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross!"

Amazing. Then a tiny human being. Jesus. Now, exalted above all.

If we are not amazed, frankly we're not thinking!!

We've been asked to contribute to a CHRISTMAS MESSAGE and GREETING.

What's best? Merry Christmas? Seasons Greetings?

I'd rather say, give Jesus the honour that is his due. Thank Him for Who He is. Worship Him. Ask Him for all you need for life and godliness.

THEN, you'll have a HAPPY CHRISTMAS.

*Robert Benn, Moderator General
Presbyterian Church of Australia*

Seventh-day Adventist Church

GOD'S WAYS ARE DIFFERENT FROM OUR WAYS! CHRISTMAS is just the time to come to terms with that.

CHRISTMAS reveals the way God fights against sin. God could have wiped out sin by wiping out humanity when we rebelled. But instead He chose to put Himself at ultimate risk so that He could take our place and die for our sins. That all began when God chose to become one with His own creation – and did so beginning at the most vulnerable stage of human existence, a baby.

Yes, Christmas is a time to remember God's extraordinary act of becoming a vulnerable human so that He could save us. He is a real person in history. It is worth remembering that this Jesus who came in such a humble manner is, in fact, the King of kings. Yet He is much more than that. He is the Creator. Our Creator came in humility as one of us and then died for our sins. Amazing! And the result is that we can find forgiveness through Him.

Let us, this Christmas, humble ourselves before such a wonderfully gracious God and seek forgiveness. He is so eager to forgive and is able to do so because, as a human, He died in our place. In forgiveness you will receive a peace that passes all understanding!

God's ways are so different from our ways! And aren't we glad they are!

*Pastor Ken Vogel, General Secretary
Seventh-day Adventist Church*

Uniting Church in Australia

How different Christmas feels this year! Twelve months ago the economy was steaming along, it felt like the new government was doing all the right things, our prosperity and security seemed assured.

But since the middle of this year it's all changed. Now we feel vulnerable. Unemployment is on the rise, a recession may hit, the Aussie dollar has plummeted, living standards may drop. Terrorism is in the news again, the war in Afghanistan goes badly, ice caps are melting, and Africans are still dying from disease and poverty.

Wars, disasters, poverty and vulnerability were part of Jesus' world too. The Roman Empire had a firm grip on Jesus' world - they taxed heavily, they ruled with brutality, and they dealt ruthlessly with every insurgency.

Jesus came into this world, teaching God's love and modelling a life of self-giving service and peace.

True security lies in knowing you're loved, no matter what. That's what the birth of Jesus means for us. No matter who we are or what our circumstances, God's love and God's guidance are there for us.

Receive God's love afresh this Christmas, and thus find true security in life.

Revd Gregor Henderson, President
Uniting Church in Australia