

The Joy of Christmas

John 1:12-14

Grace and peace to you all from God our Father and his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ, I wonder did you get nice Christmas presents? Or haven't you opened them yet? ... Not yet? Oooo, you poor people. You see, I follow the German tradition — we've done everything, so I know what's in the kitty, and I don't have to worry.

You know, I wish I could give you a Christmas present. Would you like one? A great one! I wish I was as rich as one of these billionaires — you know the faces, don't you, of these very rich people. Why would I wish to be a billionaire today? Well, I'd hire a plane, I'd pack you all into the plane, and we'd fly.

Where do you want to go? Where would you like to go? Anywhere in the world? Well, I'd take you to Tanzania. Have any of you been to Tanzania? You know where Tanzania is, hopefully, do you? Yes, in Africa. I think it's one of the most magnificent countries. We'd come to Dar es Salaam and we'd be sweating. It's *really* hot there, hot and humid, and you'd say, "How can people live here?" But they do.

We'd climb into a small plane and we'd fly to Mbeya, which is really high altitude, just beautiful countryside — nice weather! We'd pull on our jumpers, because it gets cold there — in Africa! Crazy, isn't it? (It's like the people from Germany coming to Australia and saying, "Where are the kangaroos? And why are we cold in Melbourne?")

Then we'd jump into a bus and we'd drive to Etiata [sp?]. Ever heard of Etiata? I don't think so. You can't even find it on a map. It's a small mission station, in the middle of nowhere. We'd go to church there — there's a small Lutheran church, with not bench pews like these — just bricks lined up, so you sit really hard — you can't fall asleep as you can fall asleep here!

We'd witness the joy of the Africans celebrating Christmas. Man, they can celebrate! Now you might think, who can celebrate? The healthy, wealthy, and wise people, those that have great attire? No. Most of the people sitting there are pretty poor, and the clothes they are wearing for that service are the only clothes they have. Some of them are pretty sick, because there's a Lutheran hospital nearby, and they would kind of come from the hospital to church to worship. But they would celebrate, full of joy! Why? Why would people who are poor celebrate? Any idea? You should know. You should know why they celebrate Christmas. Because Christ our Lord was born! Now, if that's not a reason to celebrate, I don't know what is. When they leave the service, they're still happy. They go back to their world, just like the shepherds go back to their flock; but something has changed — something that causes them to be able to bear their lives, that gives them hope — hope that this is not all.

I wish I could take you there, just for you to experience how great it is to see people filled with the Holy Spirit, and full of joy, full of hope, full of love; because that's what Christmas is all about. God wants to fill us with hope, with stamina, with courage, with truth, with love.

I told this once in Springvale [church], and I said I wish I could take you to Africa. One of the old ladies came to me afterwards and said, "Pastor, stop talking about Africa, because people in Australia can be just as good Christians as people in Africa; and you can experience the joy of

Christmas just as well in Australia as in Africa.” And she’s right. Of course you can. And I do hope that you are filled with this Christmas joy. Are you? Well, the kids might be, because they are looking forward to a great present. But I remember one Christmas where I was looking forward to a great present, and there it was! I played with it for ten minutes, and it was broken. Nearly all my Christmas presents were broken on Christmas Day — I don’t know why. But it just proved to me that things don’t make us happy for ever. Success in our jobs doesn’t make us happy for ever. Being popular doesn’t make us happy for ever — or does it? No — the only thing that can make us truly happy is the love of God. Because the love of God promises us forgiveness of our sins. It says, “Yes, you weren’t the best person in your life; but don’t worry! Jesus came so that you can be free of your sin.”

The only thing that can make us truly hopeful is the promise that God gives: “You are going to live, even when you die!” Why? Because Christ rose, and promised to us, “Those that believe in me will live, even though they die.” Do you get it?

I really love Christ, and I hope you do too; because, in his time, women and children were second-rate citizens. And what did he do? He accepted them, he cuddled them — not just women, but the kids too. He said, “To those that act like children, and behave like children accepting God’s love without question — to those, the kingdom of God belongs.” And remember how he allowed women to be his disciples? Do you remember that? They are even mentioned by name in the Bible. Isn’t that great? At a time when women and children [were second-rate citizens], Jesus showed that it doesn’t matter what gender you have, it does not matter how rich or how poor, how intelligent or how dumb you are — God loves you. And God wants to put you on your feet so that you can stand up for love. Isn’t that wonderful? I hope you will realise how great this love is. It’s the only love that comes to us freely, without any prejudice, without anything we have to do beforehand. So I hope that the Holy Spirit will instil this love in you today.

And there’s more. We sang the psalm, didn’t we? But we missed out a few verses, and I think those verses are very important to us today when we talk about global warming and other horrible things. Because, from the Bible we know that Creation is also suffering under death and decay. But Paul wrote that “When Christ returns, Creation will be set free from death and decay.” And that’s why, in Psalm 98 after the humans are encouraged to sing praises to God, verse 7 goes like this:

Let the sea resound and everything in it,
The world and all who live in it,
Let the rivers clap their hands,
Let the mountains sing together for joy.
Let them sing before the Lord.

I’m just having this image of a mountain clapping his hands and singing. Well, sometimes if you are nature, you get this feeling that nature praises God, don’t you? But still, all these beautiful places today face death and decay. But when Christ returns, *then* there will be no more death. This should give us courage to stand up for creation; it should give us the stamina because God’s kingdom began with the birth of Jesus Christ, and it’s growing; and we should be part of it — we are honoured to be part of it.

So let us praise God for this love.

Did any of you go to listen to Handel’s *Messiah* this year? I love the part when it says, “The trumpets shall sound” — do you know that part? I wish I could sing, and I would sing it to you now: “The trumpets shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible.” Man, that’s a good

message! Yes, we are going to die; and yesterday my granddaughter ran faster than me — how horrible isn't it? We can see how we are growing old and decrepit. But our future! Our future is secure in God's hands. That's why in Africa, the Africans say, "We get younger with each day." It doesn't make sense — or does it? It does, because with each day we come closer to eternity, so we get younger each day.

Now, I don't know whether you really trust what I have just said. You might say, "Well, he gets paid to say that. He's one of those official Christians." You might be right — but I tell you, I wouldn't preach if I didn't believe it. But I would like to ask those of you that have questions and doubts, those who don't trust this message of salvation — don't discard the offer of God too quickly. We have a good example in the story of the birth of Jesus. Remember what it says when Mary heard what the shepherds had to say about this newborn child? What did she do? She weighed all the words in her heart, and pondered over them. Remember that passage? I think that, if we have doubts, that's a good way for us to go: that we *think about* God's love; that we *pray* to him to instil this love in us, to be born again in our hearts and in our lives. So my encouragement to those amongst you who are just here because your mum or your dad forced you to come, is this: please, remember the promise that you heard today in the readings. Remember the promise that we are meant to be children of God, children of the creator of the universe! That's our destination. Think about it. Let it sink into your life. Meditate about it. And I'm pretty sure that, if you do, you will eventually come to understand how magnificent this love is that we celebrate at Christmas.

I started with Africa; I'd like to end with an African Christmas story. I'm sorry to ramble on, but it's only Christmas once a year, isn't it. Well, the African story goes like this.

There's an old African man who hears during the Christmas service that the wise men, the kings, go to Jesus and bring presents. And he thinks to himself, "I should do that too, because after all, I love him!" So he goes home, and he lies in bed. It's quite cold in the hut, so he takes the blanket over him and he's quite comfortable, and he thinks, "What on earth am I going to give to Jesus?" And while he's cuddling in his blanket, he thinks, "Ahh, he must be cold." And the next morning he takes the blanket, and off he goes; and it's quite a distance to Jesus. And he walks and walks and comes there, and says, "Jesus! Here's the blanket for you." And Jesus says, "I'm sorry. Foxes have got holes, but the Son of Man has no place to rest his head." You know that story, don't you.

So he did not accept the blanket. "It must not have been the right present," the man says, so he takes the blanket and goes home. On his way home, he comes across a path where suddenly there's a snake. Luckily he's got a big stick, and he chases the snake away (he's a good Australian — he doesn't kill snakes). So he chases the snake away. And while he does that, he thinks, "Ahh! Jesus has got no place to stay — I'm sure he needs a good stick to defend himself." So the next morning he's off again to bring him the stick. And what did Jesus say? "I've not come to kill people. I could get a whole army to defend me..." Remember when he says that in the story of the Passion — "I could have a whole army defending me"? "I can't use your stick. Those that take the sword will die by the sword."

"Errggh!" the man says. "Another present that didn't hit the mark." So he walks home, and it's far away, so his feet are hurting, and he's thirsty. And when he comes home, his good wife has a bowl of water, washes his feet, gives him a nice cold beer, and he thinks, "Ahhh, it's good to be served like this, isn't it? I know what I'll do. Tomorrow I'll go to Jesus and offer him my service."

So off he goes. And he comes to Jesus, and says, "You didn't want my blanket, I can understand that. You didn't want my stick, fair enough. But I'm sure you will accept my service, won't you?"

And Jesus says, "The Son of Man has not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as an atonement for sin."

“What’s wrong with you, Jesus? You don’t accept my presents? What can I give you? You now, I’ve come three times now, and it’s a darned long walk!”

Jesus says, “You can give me something.”

“Yeah? What can I give you?”

“Well, you can give me your sin. You can give me your fear. You can give me your hatred against your neighbours. You can give me all the bad things that destroy your life. And then live, and be truly alive.”

That’s the story. I hope you can remember it, and celebrate it. Of course, it’s only a story, I know, *but* it’s a story I heard a long time ago and I could remember it, because it’s a story that reminded me of the love of Christ, which is open for all of us.

Have a merry Christmas, a blessed one. And may God instil in you this joy of Christmas. That’s my wish for all of us. Amen.