

## Area clergy give thoughts on season

*Abundant Life is the Spirit of Christmas*

Something about Christmas captures human hearts and imaginations. Christmas motivates us to deeds of affection and acts of love. The spirit of giving becomes infectious. We easily commit random acts of kindness and become ninjas of compassion.

When we contribute to a food bank, a kettle campaign or a toy drive over this season, we wonder anew at how good this makes us feel. When will we ever learn that the joy of sharing can be experienced any day and every day between our annual celebrations of Christmas? When will we actually grasp the whole truth of Christmas?

At the heart of the Christian celebration of Christmas is the self-giving of God, the creator of all that is. For love of us, God, the limitless Almighty, embraces sharing in our limited and brief human living. God enters into our history in our world as Jesus by being born - just like you and me. This is the truth that lies at the heart of Christian faith-Jesus was born for the sake of this world - not the next one. That is the self-giving and sharing that Christmas actually proclaims. This is the world-changing reality that lies at the heart of the story of the Babe of Bethlehem.

A familiar seasonal carol nails it. "Lo, within a manger lies, he who built the starry skies," it marvels. And God in Jesus did this for the sake of this world so that the kingdom of God will continue to come in the here-and-the-now of this world with or without any one of us!

Please consider some his-

tory for a moment. The world into which Jesus was born was a broken one - much like this one for some people. His peasant parents were citizens of an oppressed land suffering under a brutal military occupation. Food was scarce in the subsistence economy. After the sun set, absolute darkness was unrelieved by any artificial light.

The Jewish faith, while tolerated, was not the religion of the ruling army of occupation and was regarded by them as alien in its own homeland. There was violence in the streets. Taxes were high. Of the children who were born at the same time as Jesus, a third would die before reaching the age of six. Another third would have perished by the time he turned sixteen. And by the time he began his public ministry in his late twenties, three-quarters of his contemporaries were dead. Accidents, illness, famine, war, overwork and mortal exhaustion were everyday realities of that world.

While everyone reading these words enjoys levels of leisure and comfort and wealth beyond imagination in first-century Palestine, there are corners of this world today where families still struggle to eke out existence in a world just like the first-century Palestine into which Jesus was born. And many of the people in those places are still waiting for the good news of Christmas.

During the human lifetime of Jesus, he challenged this broken way the world worked. His vision of a new order inspired followers and challenged authorities. His challenge to Sadducees and Pharisees was not really over trivial self-important matters like his own beliefs, his own

theology or his own religious opinions - but was over the use of religion to exploit the poor again.

His challenge to the political authorities was not over the laws or the constitution or social rules; Jesus challenged a world-vision that imposed peace by might and order through military violence. Jesus did not reject the Jewish faith; he sought to reform its practice so that it might become just and life-giving again.

Jesus did not lead an armed rebellion against Rome; he challenged its violent and exploitative world-view that exploited the poor to support an enormous death-dealing military machine. For the former religious challenge, he was denounced and vilified; for the latter challenge to Rome's world-view, he was nailed to a cross and left for dead.

The birth of Jesus is just the beginning of the real story. And it is how that story ends that gives the beginning its full meaning. For Christians, the celebration of Christmas is just the first chapter in a much bigger story.

The gracious self-giving of God goes way beyond his sharing the joys, strengths, sorrows and weakness that human flesh inherits. The gracious self-giving of God who is revealed in Jesus extends to compassionate action for those who are poor, sick, sorrowful, lonely and exploited.

His entire ministry that unfolds after his birth in Bethlehem embraces those who are hungry and hurting and overworked and poor on the margins of society. In my reading of the Gospel, Jesus was born to bring good news to any person whose living was diminished by the tyran-

ny of others or by the weight of their own sin.

The resurrection and ascension of Jesus express fully the transforming, world-changing, life-blessing power of God's love in Christ.

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10) might well be the way that Jesus himself would choose to describe his birth-day - what we now call Christmas. For me the true spirit of Christmas is summed up in one phrase - "abundant living."

What does "abundant living" mean? For some in our society, "abundant living" can mean having lots of stuff - more than could ever be needed - to eat or to drink or to wear or spend or even to give away. Is this the "abundant life" about which Jesus spoke and for which he gave up his life? Despite my participation in such Christmas excess, I do not think this is what Jesus had in mind - but I could be wrong and not for the first time.

What if "abundant living" were more about how life is lived and not about the stuff we have accumulated for living it?

Then, "abundant living" could mean growing within a loving, life-giving and life-changing relationship to God in Christ despite human weaknesses and errors.

Then, "abundant living" might be belonging to a covenantal faith community that models healthy, transparent, and affectionate Christ-like living.

Then, "abundant living" could mean seeking and finding hope, experiencing belonging, giving and receiving forgiveness, and finding purpose, meaning and direction.

Then, "abundant living" would be sharing the joy of relationship to God and to

other people in Christ - regardless of situation or circumstance. Then, "abundant living" would be trying to embrace "whatever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely and of good report" (Philippians 4:8) for as long as God continues to share the gift of life with each of us.

For me, "abundant living" not only affirms the absolute value of choosing to try to live rightly as a disciple of Jesus in this life in this world, but also it is a reminder that each human spirit passes along this earthly way just once. How and what we choose to do and to become here can be judged simply - whether or not our living has built up or diminished others and ourselves.

As a follower of Jesus, I hold that choosing the Christmas spirit of "abundant living" has consequences for the person we finally become in the abundant life of eternity in Christ.

As hard as it might be to practise "abundant living" everyday, following Jesus seems to demand that disciples should make an effort to do just that. What a world that would create! In response to the cries of the hurting and the oppressed, there would be an army of more than a billion people singing to them, "We have come to you that you might have life, and have it abundantly - we have come to make a difference for you in your life."

Is the possibility - however remote - that this might actually happen some day what fuels the annual generosity of heart and of spirit at Christmas? Is this a vision of "the coming kingdom of God" pictured in the words of a charismatic vagabond Jewish preacher two thousand years ago?

Please take time this month to contemplate anew the wonder of our self-giving

Creator-God who chose to be born as Jesus, a human like us, so that we might better see the potential for divine love which lies within each one of us. May you find ways to express that love every day all year.

May the Holy Child of Bethlehem make you merry and bless you and those whom you love with peace in this sacred Christmas season.

The Rev'd John Lockyer  
Parish of Mono

—o—  
"If God be for us, who can be against us?"

Well, we've almost made it. We are coming to the day that we have all been preparing for. And if, on Christmas Eve, you haven't bought your Christmas tree, it will be too late. If you have any Christmas shopping left, it will be too late. If you haven't bought the turkey, it will be too late. . . . unless, of course, you're an Orthodox Christian and then on January 7 it will be too late.

One thing I think it's never too late to do is to give thanks. I think, in fact, that that is what Christmas is all about and why we come together in song and praise. We will hear the story of the shepherds who, after their visit to the manger, return glorifying and praising God. The shepherds move from fear to a journey of discovery, to sharing the news. I think that we do the same as well, from fear, to a journey, to sharing.

First we hear in the story of Jesus' birth the words: "Do not be afraid for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10). Fear is something that we all experience from time to time, but there are times and places where people live in constant fear.

If you read the newspa-

pers, watch TV or listen to radio you can understand why. The Toronto Star, late last year, showed a calendar in their Sunday edition that illustrated events around the world that had occurred during the month of November. Almost every day had a catastrophic event of immense proportions; some had two.

There are well over 300 references in scripture to not be afraid. God knows that we will be afraid and there is good reason, but in the end we are told not to be, because Jesus' birth says that something new is coming that will change the world. God's angels declare good news and the shepherds begin a journey to see what this is all about.

We later read the words: "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has

taken place, which the Lord has made known to us" (Luke 2:15). It is often in peculiar and unusual ways that the goodness and blessings of life are made known to us just as they were to the shepherds and everyone from Mary and Joseph on down about the birth of Jesus. But what about the pain and misery in the world today we may ask, how are the blessings of the world made known to those who suffer.

I am reminded of the story of a man who goes to the Priest and complains, "Life is unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?" The Priest asks the man to tell him about his living conditions and the man tells him of the one room with

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