

Archbishop Peter Jensen's 2003 Christmas Message

A child is an island of curiosity surrounded by a sea of question-marks – and never more so than at Christmas.

My wife and I never get tired of watching our seven grandchildren play that eternal game of trying to work out what's in the package without removing the paper. And watching a child finally open a present can be like taking a trip back to the happiest moments of your own childhood.

But it seems to me that each year it's getting harder to hear the carols and the familiar sounds of summer like cicadas and the surf, over the sound of voices raised in anger.

2003 has given Australia and the world as much cause for grief as it has for happiness. Every overseas report seems to contain a reference to new casualties in Iraq, Israel or Palestine. And here at home rows over refugees have given way to a growing concern about Australia's plummeting birth rate. Government ministers have pointed the finger this Christmas at our desire to give our kids more, meaning we have less room round the table. But what are we giving up to afford that Play Station?

Here is a strange and wonderful fact: there is hardly anything more



commonplace in the human world than the birth of a child; and yet, there is hardly anything more awe-inspiring. It always seems unique; it always is unique.

Christmas brings home the settled ordinariness of family life. If anyone was more ordinary than Joseph and Mary, I don't know who they would be. The birth of their child was commonplace. A stable since there was no room in the motel; a feeding trough since there was no cradle; more up to date, perhaps, a doubt about who the father really was. Eventually there was a king who tried to murder him and his family became refugees in a foreign country. But Jesus had a family made up of a mother and a father, and a family full of love and care for this little one.

Why do we desire children less than we once did? Is it really the financial expense of raising children, or do we simply fear the responsibility of parenting?



Christmas is the best time to consider what we really owe our children. We can fail our children by not giving them the spiritual foundations which they need for life; by failing to tell them the old, old story with its beginning in God creating the world and its end in God judging the world. Especially we can fail to pass on the story above all stories: that Jesus Christ came into the world to save us from our sins and give us hope for the future.

I was greatly encouraged by the statement released some weeks ago by Gary Hardgrave MP, our Federal Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs. He said that many kindergartens, schools and businesses have decided they have to ban [Christmas] things because they might offend others. While acknowledging they are well motivated, Mr Hardgrave said they have it all completely wrong.

"I would hate to see people, especially young children, giving up Christmas traditions that have been with their families for generations," Mr Hardgrave said.

I say Amen to his words.

Of course we can all sympathise with people who approach Christmas with a degree of cynicism. The 'Disneyfication' of this holy event may have left you wondering whether there is anything more to this season than an ever-increasing credit card bill. But if we peer beneath the wrappings we can still see God's real gift: a saviour.

I suppose if we were writing the script for the visit of God to earth, we would literally turn it into an epic. Sovereigns and great political leaders who land on Australian shores are surrounded by so much pomp and circumstance; imagine how we would think of the coming of the King of the Universe! And we would not be that far wrong: his second coming really will be glorious. But not his first coming.

That baby was vulnerable, poor, ordinary as well as special; a refugee from heaven and a refugee from home. It was in this utterly humble way that Jesus served us: 'though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty you may become rich' (2 Corinthians 8: 9). In saving us like this Jesus set a pattern of life which we are bound to follow. His concern was universal; so is ours. It is not restricted by class, race, language or creed.

It's sometimes hard to see through the Christmas trees to find the ultimate realities of life. There's so much to do to get ready for our Australian Christmas that we can find ourselves organising the party of the year and forgetting who is the main guest.

This Christmas, deck the halls with bits of tinsel, get the roast ready, by all means go to the beach – but find the right centre for your celebrations. Don't let the decorations distract you from the real gift of life and peace God offers in Christ Jesus.

– Peter Jensen