



Christmas Down Under: An Advent Reflection by Patty Fawkner SGS

Advent in Australia

How many Australians actually dream of a white Christmas? A good deal fewer, I'd guess, than those who, over the coming weeks, will hear Bing Crosby's mellifluous rendition of Irving Berlin's classic. Yet, borrowed images from another hemisphere abound on greeting cards and in the pre-Christmas advertising deluge.

Perhaps as a nation come of age, and as a people whose many citizens originate from climes other than northern Europe, it is time for us to claim new images in our celebration of the seasons of Advent and Christmas. If we had eyes to see and ears to hear, we might detect in our early Australian summer and our end of year social rituals, hints – even signs and symbols – of the true meaning of Christmas.

December is a time of waiting. School leavers wait for exam results. Children wait for Santa. Families wait for loved ones to come together for Christmas. Tired workers wait for the long summer holiday to rest, relax and recharge. And the harried or cynical wait for the period of forced jollity to be over.

During the oppressive "Build Up" in Australia's Top End, Territorians wait for the rain to come. Much of this rain will flow from the lush tropics and into the scorched, barren centre of our continent.

The warmth, the light and heat point to a fullness and a potency of life. During these weeks, we wait for life to unfold and our parched spirits to be nourished.

Waiting & Yearning

The Christian liturgical season of Advent is a waiting time and a yearning time. Jacarandas and agapanthas, flowers of advent purple, remind us that something, someone is nigh. Advent encourages us to be patient, to learn to wait for more, for meaning to emerge from the mundane, for mystery to be made manifest. Unrecognised or not, it is God for whom we wait, for whom we long, and whom we desire. We wait for God who is the More; we long for God who is Gracious Mystery; we desire God who is the Meaning of our existence.

A Love Story

Mary of Nazareth, not the kitsch, saccharine lady in blue, but the earthy, gutsy, young pregnant woman, waits for the birth of her child. She detects the coming of God in her own body. And that's the Christmas message. God, who is Saviour and life-giver, doesn't come separate from the real stuff of our daily existence. God comes in the flesh, in our flesh. God takes upon Godself our human giftedness and human frailty. God became human, the ancient Greek fathers said, so that we might become God.

The long summer days of December and January conspire to take us out of doors. We attend carols by candlelight, school concerts and end of year functions in December. The warmer days and holidays of January entice us to the beach, to go camping, to watch the cricket. We are invited to come outside and are called out of ourselves to mingle and rub shoulders with humanity. We're in this together, the weather seems to be saying. A summer Christmas reminds us that Christianity is not a privatised religion about God and me. The Christmas story is a key chapter in a story about God and humanity. It is a love story still being written.

The Silly Season

We call it the silly season – and with good reason. We're busy and stretched and we give and receive some frivolous gifts, all part of a fine tradition. The gold is o.k. but, really, of what practical use are frankincense and myrrh for a new-born babe and young mother? Then and now, we know it's the thought, the desire to connect, of wanting to give, that counts.

It is the silly season where well-worn rituals fall flat and commercial schmalz and hype fail to deliver. Yet, could anything be 'sillier' than God choosing to be one of us, to become a member of the flawed, fractious human race? The Scriptural narrative of the birth of Jesus reveals that God is a God of surprises, a God who invariably bypasses the accepted ways, the proper people, the agreed-upon protocols. Jesus is born in a feeding box, with shepherds – the outcasts of society – the first celebrants of his birth. Wise men make a treacherous journey from the East with nothing to guide them but a star.

Emmanuel – God With Us

We will see stars a'plenty over the coming weeks. Our own Southern Cross which hangs low in the summer sky reminds us that the birth which we celebrate at Christmas is no sentimental feast reserved only for children. The cross is the Christian sign of paradox and ambiguity. Jesus, the one whose life begins inauspiciously in a stable and ends with equal ignominy on a hill, is the one whose birth, life, death and resurrection reveals that, despite the pain and suffering of our world, that God is *Emmanuel – God with us*. The God for whom we wait this Advent, the God who comes as we wait, is God with us and God for us.

For Reflection & Discussion

- Patty Fawkner finds the meaning of Advent in the people, places and events around her. What is this time of year like for you? Can you sense God at work in the ordinary things of your world, right here, right now?
- God is not separate from the real stuff of our daily existence. Our use of material things, and their place in our lives, matters. What does our giving express? Do the production and consumption of the gifts that we buy promote human dignity?
- We celebrate the mystery of God becoming human. Jesus is a brother to each of us, making us members of one human family. Does this influence how you think and feel about human dignity and human rights?
- How can we extend the Christmas feeling of kinship, care and connectedness – that 'we are all in this together' – to embrace the whole human family?
- Jesus' sharing in our humanity can be seen as an act of solidarity – he is Emmanuel, God with us. In what ways could Christians express solidarity with those for whom there is 'no room at the inn' this Christmas?
- In what ways are our lives writing a love story?