

**Christmas Day**  
**25/12/2006**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 52:7-10**  
**Psalm 98**  
**Hebrew 1:1-4**  
**John 1:1-14**

### **The Word made flesh: merciful love embodied**

---

People rejoice when a child is born. Even in the darkest circumstances, we experience a deep kind of joy, take courage, and find new hope because life promises to go on. There is no doubt that part of the attraction of Christmas is that it is the story of a birth. The Christmas story has been carefully ornamented with signs and meanings over the centuries. But nothing can alter the foundational thought that, in this birth, God entered our world in a new and particular way, and for a purpose.

The word “God” is not a name or title unique to Christians and the Church. Almost every culture has its version of God talk. Some say this is a sign of a basic human longing for awe and wonder. And sometimes “God” is simply a version of what we want projected onto a cosmic screen. The word “God” means different things to different people. There are good gods and ugly gods. There are gods that are domesticated, like household figures whom we control and with whom we chat. There are nasty gods who are blamed when random events crush or disrupt life and property, as in the Tsunami. There are gods that fit into the gap that opens when we reach the limits of our present knowledge. Experience tells us that we do have a capacity for awe and wonder. When a child is born we catch a glimpse of something more. When we encounter the full force of nature, or its beauty, we have a sense of life that is bigger than we are. It causes us to ponder what is our place in all of this. Perhaps it is, as some say, that we feel the need to be recognized and spoken to, loved, judged and forgiven. Who of us does not want to be able to cast off all sense of alienation and aloneness? Who of us would pass up an opportunity to put right the effects of our cruelty to indigenous people, or resolve our feelings about the scars left on our world by nuclear catastrophe, or the destruction of the environment?

At some time you may have seen photos of the building of Sydney Harbour Bridge or a similar type of span bridge. In an amazing way the span begins to grow out from each side until it finally meets in the middle. One theologian says that as humans we try to understand God by beginning to build a bridge from two ends. One side is driven by philosophical questioning; seeking clarity, unity and meaning. The other side is driven by mythological interest in a divine life that is personal and engaging. But what God is difficult to put into words. God **exceeds** the fiercest longing, and the profoundest speculation. And there are things we cannot do for ourselves. On our own we cannot learn a language, or know ourselves as loved. We cannot complete the bridge on our own. But when a conversation starts, and we discover community, we may realise that the clue to life is to look in a different place.

The Bible does not seek to prove the existence of God. For us, God-talk arises because of a response to something that has been said to us, and demonstrated for us. The message of our readings today is that what we long for was there from the start of

creation. The prophets heard and declared the promise that God would dwell with us; a promise that John says became embodied in a life. A child was born who lived and died as we do. Others may think differently, but we understand God through the gospel narratives that tell the story of Jesus Christ, whose life from birth to resurrection declared that God is interested in us. In John, the Word was God's revealing utterance or presence in the world. The Word meant God was experienced as active, not static, as a conversation-partner that later took flesh in a human life. Word is not an abstract principle. When John says that in him was life, and that life was the light of all, he is saying God, for whom no name is adequate, is nevertheless the one of whom all true words speak.

The richness of this season, its pure Eros, is a result of this narrative, which has merciful love at its heart. This knowledge was given, not to fill the gap in the bridge of our understanding. It was given so that we could find the right starting point. Something which we otherwise find so easy to forget or lose sight of.

In the world today it is the role of the church to continue to listen to this narrative, and to declare it for all who will listen. You could say the church is like the sentinels on the walls of the city, pictured in the first reading. They see the feet of the messengers running to say: God is coming in search of us to comfort and restore. But the irony is the arm of Lord laid bare in the sight of all nations was the perfect, beautiful arm of a baby. It was first seen by grubby shepherds, and worshipped by pagan, foreign kings. And those perfect, beautiful arms were last seen stretched in pain and suffering on a cross. Embodied, merciful love reached as far as that, for us.

Each Christmas we hope people will hear this message, receive its gift, and live in it. What could it mean for us? You may have seen the film *Joyeux Noel*, which tells a true story from World War 1. At Christmas 1914 the guns in the trenches of Europe fell silent as the opposing sides each sought to have their own Christmas. The singing of Christmas carols attracted the soldier towards one another. Before long enemies embraced, and celebrated Mass together. Then the soldiers returned to the trenches and, reluctantly gave in to the evil powers of war again. "Without an enemy there can be no war."

It is possible for people to live by another truth and to contradict the darkness. This year the Amish people of Pennsylvania, who are committed Christian pacifists, suffered a shocking murder of several young girls at one of their schools. The perpetrator took his-own life. Instead of seeking revenge, the Amish went out of their way to embrace the wife and family of the murderer. They offered to them the same comfort and support given to the grieving in their own community. They attended the funeral of the killer. And they took his family to funerals of some of the children. They carefully established longer-term contact so that the family is not destroyed by the tragedy their husband/father created. Such actions seem impossible to many. But they are a living demonstration that, in the face of crushing disaster it is possible to live by another imagination. It is possible to live out of the narrative of merciful love of which Christmas speaks. It is possible to allow this to become the sovereignty under which we live.

That is why we are here. To sing these songs and retell these stories so that this life will kindle our imagination and reshape how we will seek to be in the world. When that

happens we will have found the power to live in renewal of life. Then the world will be changed for good, and we, and many will have a truly Merry Christmas, not just today, but for many days to come.