



Greetings,

I pray that this Christmas letter may be a source of encouragement during this Christmas season. There is so much joy, hope, love and peace to be found during the Christmas season. Notwithstanding, sometimes one has to go searching for it. Music concerts, church services, old Christmas movies and even social gatherings can be experiences that nurture the Christmas spirit. I am one of those people who believes we need to be intentional about searching out spiritual encounters with God. Thankfully, there are a variety of opportunities and experiences where the spirit of Christmas is clearly evident. We simply need to search them out.

Reaching out to others also brings a special kind of joy and hope at Christmas. Perhaps you are already in the middle of your final plans for the Christmas season. You may have already sent your cards and even have a list of people you intend to connect with during the Christmas season. It's always a good time to connect in person or by phone to share Christmas greetings. You will be surprised by how many people will be grateful to hear from you. A simply greeting of "Merry Christmas, I've been praying for you", can go a long way to brighten someone's day.

Christmas can be complicated. Sometimes it's about schedules or travel; other times it's about health issues or finances. The truth remains that complications can leave some of us anxious or stressed by the events and activities of the season. Sometimes a gentle reminder to oneself that you can only do what the circumstances and your own well-being allow is key to enjoying the season.

We all need to be deeply sensitive to the fact that there are a lot of people who have lost a loved-one recently. This may be you or someone you know well that is in the midst of grieving. That is why it is very important to be gentle with ourselves as we make our way through the season. Grief has a way of sneaking up on us and one may feel profound sadness, especially when it seems everyone is happy but us. Again, to allow ourselves to be truly present in the moment and let go of other's expectations is a healthy approach to the Christmas season.

During our Advent celebrations we have been reminded of the significance of hope. Bishop Desmond Tutu once wrote, "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness." It's during the Christmas season that you and I can be the source of hope for those who are going through times of darkness. When others have lost sight of the light, we can be a source of hope to remind them that there is light even if they can't see it right now. There may be someone that you love that is hurting and your presence and your witness

can remind them of the words of Robert H Schueler who said, "Let your hopes, not your hurts shape your future." Being a good listener to someone who is hurting this Christmas can remind them that they are not alone and that they are loved. We will need to be reminded of the words of Dr Billy Graham, "God's mercy and grace give me hope - for myself, and for our world." Perhaps listening to Christmas carols and attending worship more often than we watch the news may allow for a more peaceful Christmas in our minds and in our souls. This is not denying that there are painful situations going on in the world, but rather that we cannot resolve all the conflict, confusion and chaos in one day. Richard Rohr once wrote, "The theological virtue of hope is the patient and trustful willingness to live without closure, without resolution, and still be content and even happy because our satisfaction is now at another level and our source is beyond ourselves." Christmas can remind us both who we are and whose we are in Christ.

One of my favourite writers once penned these words. "I think everybody needs four things in life. Everybody needs something to do regardless of age. Everybody needs someone to love. Everybody needs something to hope for, and of course everybody needs someone to believe in. I believe that someone is Jesus Christ." Christmas is the reminder that God so loved the world that He gave us Jesus.

On the first Christmas Eve we are told that shepherds were in the field tending their flocks. An angel of the Lord appeared to them in the middle of their work shift. Indeed, God can show up in our lives in the busyness of the Christmas season or even at work. Some might say, I'm a little too busy right now to consider the idea of "God showing up". I understand if you think that yet another distraction during the Christmas season is more than you want to handle, but the angel's announcement was lifechanging. As is any moment when God shows up in our lives today. Let's reflect for a moment on the story of the shepherds. First of all, they were not out enjoying a quiet evening of gazing at the stars. Instead, they were hard at work protecting the sheep from danger in the midst of darkness. I find it reassuring that God shows up in the midst of our darkest moments and shares a message of new hope. I understand if someone is wary of an encounter with God, but consider that the encounter may be a blessing. Indeed, a lifechanging moment. Most people are nervous that such a moment may require a change of plans or an adjustment to our priorities. The story of the shepherds reminds us that God can use anyone or any situation to engage us.

The angel brought a powerful message. That being, that you and I don't have to be afraid of God or the messenger. In a broader context, it's helpful to remember that some encounters with the Holy are bold and immediate. But sometimes there is a gradual and quiet awareness that we have been blessed by a visit from the divine that has left us with a new attitude or perspective. Christmas is an amazing time for a Holy encounter. While receiving communion, singing carols, or enjoying quiet moments of reflection. It is possible that in these moments we may have an encounter with the Holy. We too may have a feeling that we have experienced angels.

Perhaps the most significant thought when reflecting on the story of the shepherds and the visit of the angels is the shepherds' reaction to the Good News. The shepherds got up and took a journey. They went to Bethlehem. Quite simply, they heard the Good News and did something about it. The invitation is that each of us needs to respond and take action. Perhaps it can be described by a "movement" from where we are to where Christ may be calling us. We may also feel compelled to share the Good News with those around us. My prayer for you this Christmas is that you may have an encounter with the Holy that brings peace, hope, joy and love.

Yours in Christ,
The Rev Canon Dr Stephen Hendry

Christmas Services
December 24 9:00am
December 24 4:00, 7:00, 10:00
December 25 9:00am