

## Christmas Eve

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, to the glory of God the Father and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

“Jesus, my Dad and the Christmas tree...”

What does Christmas really mean to you?

My earliest recollections of Christmas as a young child were of my father going out in the dead of night a few days before Christmas on a “tree-hunt”. When it came to Christmas trees in my Dad’s world there were two cardinal rules that had to be obeyed at all cost (on second thoughts, make that three). Firstly, the tree had to be real and fresh. No fake trees for the Mispion Family. Ever. Secondly, the tree had to be the biggest one around, at least bigger than our surrounding neighbours. So big, in fact, that the top had to be trimmed off in order for the tree to be able to stand vertically in the lounge. The third cardinal rule was that if my Mom wasn’t upset or unsettled by the whole episode, then clearly my Dad had failed because the tree wasn’t big enough to create sufficient drama. (Although I don’t think that the third cardinal rule was verbalised, as I grew older I realised that it existed when I started to see the twinkle in my Dad’s eye when he heard my mother’s inevitable words in a certain tone, “Geoffrey!”

I recall a specific night in question in the run up to Christmas. My family and I were living in what was then Rhodesia and I must have been all of four years old. My Dad, a junior advertising executive had secured us a lovely home in a housing estate just outside Salisbury in a suburb known as Borrowdale. The one perimeter of the estate was bordered with beautiful tall pine trees. (Yes, I know you know what’s coming...) Anyway, off my Dad went axe in hand on his traditional “tree-hunt” in the middle of the night, leaving three excited children behind ready with decorations in hand and a dubious wife and mother waiting for the inevitable. Well, this time, my father lived up to his true expectations and did not fail to deliver. He arrived back at the house after half-an-hour with an enormous Christmas tree in tow. I couldn’t believe my eyes! How on earth was this going to fit inside our modest lounge? After hearing the inevitable, “Geoffrey!” my father came up with a brilliant plan to cut a hole in the ceiling so that the tree could stand up tall and proud in the lounge.

Eventually, he settled on trimming both the bottom and top of the tree after my mother reminded him most pertinently that in fact the property did not belong to him, but to a very patient and long suffering landlord.

So the children went into action and excitedly proceeded to decorate the monster tree that now adjoined our modest home in suburbia. After all, how could Father Christmas but fail to be impressed by what must be the biggest Christmas tree in the whole of Rhodesia, if not the whole of Africa!

I do, however, recall the vigorous knocking on our front door early the next morning when the sun rose. Being very young, I couldn't follow all of the stern conversation, but I figured out enough to realise that the man speaking to my Dad was VERY upset that one of his prize trees was now missing from the row of beautiful pine trees on his property. I decided to peek through my curtain at the road and to my amazement there the perfect row of Pine trees that always lined our road... now had a perfect gap in the middle where our Christmas tree once stood.

Needless to say we moved back to South Africa soon after that and in the years that followed my Dad resorted to purchasing the traditional Christmas tree from the vendors on the side of the road in our neighbourhood... but not before he had made the poor, long-suffering trader hold up every single tree so that he could make sure that he was purchasing the biggest!

Advent and Christmas is a special time that calls us as Christians to reflect and be grateful for our friends and family, those whom we love and those who love us. It is also a reminder of the hope that the birth of Christ brings us in the world.

Just what is hope?

A formal dictionary definition defines hope as “a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen”.

*Henri Nouwen, a well respected spiritual author, explains that hope is trust that God will fulfil God's promises to us in a way that leads to true freedom. The person of hope lives in the moment with the knowledge and trust that all of life is in good hands. All the great spiritual leaders in history were people of hope. Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Mary, Jesus, Rumi, Gandhi and even Dorothy Day all*

*lived with a promise in their hearts that guided them toward the future without the need to know exactly what it would look like. Let's live with hope.*

So, if we are Jesus in the world, then by default we, as living and practising Christians living in the real world, need to be Jesus in the world, need to be a living reflection of the hope that Christ brings to the world...

This is no slight challenge... I am immediately reminded and overwhelmed of the suffering, death and pain the world around me. (I think for a moment of all the children in Aleppo and the Syrian war who have suffered tremendously- where is their hope?)

Tonight we are reminded, in joy, of the coming of our Saviour and all that He represents to the world... most of all hope. It is our duty and responsibility to share some of His light in practical and constructive ways...

How do we do this?

We need to step out of our comfort zones. We need to be looking further than just looking after our families and friends. Yes, that is important, but we are also called to make a difference in society. We are called to get involved, give of our time, give of our skills and gifts. This translates into visiting that old age home down the road, taking biscuits to the police on the late night shift, assisting at the local hospital or orphanage. It is not enough to merely donate funds and then walk away thinking that you have done your bit. Sharing the hope and light of Christ means sharing that very real Holy Spirit that in inside each and every one of us, with others, in a tangible and meaningful way. This is how hope is spread. This is how Jesus is spread. This is how the Christian Church makes a difference in the world.

I am always reminded of those beautiful words, "Joy to the world, for the Lord has come..." Just as my Dad had a cardinal rule that his Christmas tree must always be real and not fake, perhaps this advent is a good time for us to reflect as Christians so that we can remain real and alive in Christ Jesus, as opposed to being a Sunday Christian, or at worst, a fake Christian. Christmas is a stark reminder to us all of the miracle of birth and life, and specifically of a very special child born to us just over two thousand years ago. The birth of Jesus changed the world. Forever. Yes, Christmas is a time of giving, a time for

celebrating with friends and family. It is, however, also a time to reflect on the year that has been and the year to come. A time to thank God for the numerous blessings that He has given us over the past year and also a time to reflect and think how we could have done or said certain things better or differently. By dying for us, Jesus gives us the opportunity to start again, afresh. What better time than this Christmas to make that change in your life for Jesus so that He is honoured even more in all that you say and do?

I am reminded of the words of one the most beautiful classic songs ever written by Simon and Garfunkel:

When you're weary, feeling small  
When tears are in your eyes, I'll dry them all (all)  
I'm on your side, oh, when times get rough  
And friends just can't be found  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
I will lay me down  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
I will lay me down

Jesus was born.

Jesus laid down His life for us that we might have hope eternal.

May God bless you this Advent season and may you and your family have a blessed Christmas and a joyous New Year.

Blessings

Fr Darron.