

St Stephen's Uniting Church in the city

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity



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Editorial

It's that special time of the year again, when we admire the beautiful decorations in shop windows, and when Christmas trees appear in Martin Place, as well as in our parks and squares; when we plan our presents and our Christmas luncheons, and look forward to getting together for special moments with family and friends. However, it is also a time of the year when we ask ourselves questions about the true significance of the coming into the world of the Christ Child – and when we reflect on the plight of the poor and marginalised of this world.

We have chosen the following words as our theme for this Summer Issue: "The American writer and artist Agnes M. Pharo (1904-1985) had this to say about Christmas:

***'What is Christmas?
It is tenderness for the past,
courage for the present,
hope for the future.'***

What do you like best about the season of Christmas? Or you may prefer to consider: 'Balancing the joys of Christmas with the pain it brings to some'. We know that people will enjoy reading the responses of a number of members of our congregation. Alan Harper has offered his comments on what might constitute the perfect Christmas; the Rev Ken and I have had our usual in-depth conversation on certain aspects of the theme; and one of the members of our Tuesday congregation, Jennet Cunnington, has written on what she likes best about Christmas. In addition, some members of St Stephen's (including one of the youngest, Kurt Hunter) have offered us their "take" on the Christmas theme.

Everyone enjoys singing Christmas carols at this time of the year. One of our writers for "Vision", Graham Penn, has done some research and has written for us a very interesting article on the Australian Christmas Carol, *Christmas Bush for His Adorning*. We tend to be very familiar with European Christmas carols, so it is good to learn about this particular carol with its references to a familiar sight in the warm Australian summer: the Christmas bush.

A very special event took place at St Stephen's on the 20th October in the Ferguson Hall, namely the presentation of an Award for Service to Humanity, given to the Rev Ken by the District Governor of Rotary International, Dr Janice Hall. This Award was in recognition of Ken's work in founding the Early Bird Café at St Stephen's, and in supporting all the wonderful help this organisation provides for the homeless in Sydney. Judith Barton has written a great account for us of this special happening in the life of our church. Another significant event which took place on Sunday 6th November was the Sydney Open Festival; St Stephen's church was involved, and people could walk through and admire the architecture as well as our beautiful stained glass windows. Pastor Kathryn Lynch has written a very interesting article giving details of this important event at St Stephen's, which attracted over a thousand visitors.

There have been quite a number of memorable services held at St Stephen's since we last went to press. The Tuesday congregation once again teamed with the Conservatorium in a wonderful musical program. On 6th December. The hybrid delivery of the services means the Tuesday congregation is continuing to grow.





Interview with Rev Ken

Janice

Ken, is it fair to say that to-day, the coming into the world of the Christ child has been submerged beneath the baubles, the sparkles and the relentless consumerism

of the season?

I have chosen to write up the All Age Service, held on the 11th December; during this time of worship, all of the children enjoyed various activities in the old vestry, and adults present had the pleasure of listening to a special guest speaker from Chennai (south India), Florina Xavier. Following the service, members of the congregation gathered in the Ferguson Hall for a wonderful Christmas Brunch. Sincere thanks are due to Margaret Horscroft, the Convenor of our Hospitality Team, as well as to a number of members who ably assisted her in providing us with such a delicious meal – especially Judith Barton.

Lauris Harper has written a short piece on her experiences over two weeks with the people of Eugowra working as a DRCN Chaplain. She speaks of the incredible resilience of the townspeople where so much was decimated.

Finally, the “Vision” team would like to wish all our friends at St Stephen’s a truly happy and holy Christmas - and may the New Year bring us many joys, but especially that inner peace which comes to us through our desire to serve God and our fellow human beings, our “neighbours”.

Janice Dawson

Rev Ken: Before our interview starts, Janice, could I express my thanks to you and the “Vision” team for producing “Vision”, and to all who have contributed articles and photos.

Is the world submerged beneath baubles and sparkles and relentless consumerism?

I have a question after your question:

Who is ‘the world’?

The term ‘*the world*’ can sound like people other than ‘us’, but it is not. You and I are the world for whom Christ died. There is not an ‘*us and them*’. The Christmas story puts that clearly, dismantling any attitude that there are those who have entrée to God before others. We note that neither the religious leaders nor their congregations were invited to the birth of the Christ. Or perhaps to be more correct, they weren’t looking for their Messiah even though they talked about the coming Messiah a lot. A lot of religious words were said. A lot of ceremony took place. But that is not where the Messiah was born into the world. You know the rest: the Messiah was born to a young working class couple, in the midst of a busy time of that year, in a land oppressed by a conquering empire, with a mixture of people and created things paying attention: shepherds, people from other countries and other religions, livestock, a boarding house manager, a threatened politician, celestial objects, and messengers from heaven. God so loved the world that God gave God’s only son.

Janice: *How did this happen, Ken?*

Rev Ken: My answer might not be popular. I believe it is in part the failure of the congregations, the church. When Diana, the Princess of Wales, died and the authorities, church and state, left a gap of time in responding, in those few days the people of the community filled the gaps with their own home-grown monuments, memorials, and gatherings for public grief. All through time, people have created their own ceremonies to sing of the unseeable, and tell the stories of the eternal things. The church is not the ‘liturgy police’ to say how this should take

place. God did not give us that role. If liturgy is the 'work of the people', then the people's ideas need to be included in how we celebrate the holy things. When the church says 'how it should be done', sometimes speaking as if there is a law handed down by God, the community has been pushed away, or walked away.



Over time the stars in the bright sky became baubles and Christmas lights, St Nicolas became a flying celestial being in a sleigh, angels became fairies, the gifts of the wise men became "Pandora", and the righteousness of God has become the elf on the shelf. Personally, I have no problem as it shows the community trying to express the inexpressible: *God from God. Light from light. True God from true God.* My observation is that in 2022, rather than have the frowning face to reindeers and jingle bells, St Stephen's is mature enough to hold both the Latin *Veni, Veni Emmanuel* and Mariah's *All I Want For Christmas* in the same big heart that is inspired by the loving, living, saving God.

Janice: This leads on to the other question I have for you, Ken: what do you personally like best about Christmas?

I love the opportunity I have to be with the St Stephen's congregation on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and to meet for the first time people brave enough to venture into a church building. It is a unique opportunity to express the great story of Jesus visually, verbally, in music, and singing. I love seeing people feel the Holy Spirit healing and comforting and making them brave for being peace makers on earth. I see people have that 'Yes! This is the news I needed to hear' moment.

The Christmas Bowl is an Australian-born, hope-bearing, community-changing, 'barriers between churches gone' partnership with locals on the ground in bringing relief in some of the toughest conditions around the world. I love it, and Sue and I are grateful for the opportunity to give to this cause.

Finally, twelve more things I love about Christmas: *Christmas goes for 12 days.* Our family spreads over twelve days our time for catching up, for grazing on Christmas food, getting to the surf and somewhere to swim, watching Christmas movies, and summer fun. Ministry in this time has a different feel, and I love it. All of this joy spurs me on into the New Year.



Rev Ken Day and Janice Dawson

The Perfect Christmas

Why

was I so annoyed?

The chap was obviously busy, with *everyone* – home-owners like us, and businesses too – all wanting their windows cleaned before Christmas. What did it really matter if ours had to wait until January? Would anyone who came by the house over the Christmas period even notice?

But I have to confess that, if not actually annoyed, I was nevertheless irritated. My confession goes deeper than that. I have to own up to being one of those many people, at least in Australia, for whom Christmas is a kind of watershed moment, a culminating point in time when the year draws to a close; and we want that satisfying feeling that the year's many tasks and challenges have also come to an



end. We want the house to look its best, the lawns and gardens to be freshly tended, the food we provide to be just right. We want Christmas to be perfect.

I don't suppose that it's quite like that in the northern hemisphere, where the rhythm of life centres on their summer in July-August. And I don't know if other southern hemisphere nations share the Australian practice of designating Christmas as the deadline date for our professional and domestic undertakings to be brought to closure. But whatever may be the case elsewhere, in Australia, the expression, "I'd like it done before Christmas," is so much a part of our culture that we have come to regard it as inherent in the natural order.

Our aspiration for a perfect Christmas extends beyond this insistence on a yuletide deadline for every conceivable task. We want the day itself to be perfect too. However we celebrate Christmas – with a close-knit group of just family, or family and friends, or at larger gatherings embracing our wider networks of relatives and mates – we want the day to run without a hitch. We construct mental pictures for ourselves of fun, relaxing times, good food and drink, warm conversations and enjoyable relationships. "Christmas is about family and friends," we're told over and over again by those who presume to pontificate about such things. So we want the perfect day with family and friends, and we work hard to make it a reality. In fact, we *expect* Christmas to be perfect; and if we don't achieve our ideal, we feel a sense of failure. What have we done wrong? Why has our Christmas been such a disappointment, when everyone else's, it seems, has fulfilled the dream.

This year, before we proceed too far down that alluring road to the “perfect Christmas”, perhaps we could do with a bit of a reality check. The first bit of reality to acknowledge is that the notion of a perfect Christmas is the child of the advertising industry. Virtually everything that goes with that utopian vision of Christmas puts money into the pockets of businesses selling just about anything. You’d like the house to look its best – we can have those new curtains hung for you before Christmas if you act *now*. Place your order for Christmas drinks early, to be sure of having just what you need for your Christmas guests. Buy this epicurean delicacy, this gastronomic treat, so your Christmas menu will be memorable. Act now to secure that perfect gift that will bring joy to the one you love. Spend up big, because “Christmas is all about family and friends.” It’s no secret that Christmas is a bonanza for most retailers and many other businesses.

The second thing we need to acknowledge is that none of us has a perfect family, and none of us has perfect relationships either within our family or with our circle of friends. If Christmas is to involve our getting together with family members and/or friends, with whom our relationships are fractured or difficult at any other time, why would we think that they would be any different on this one particular day? Such an expectation reeks of complete self-delusion and unrealistic optimism. Life just isn’t like that.

In fact, in many families, whether they’re prepared to acknowledge it or not, Christmas is a time met with dread every year. What sort of mood will this child be in this year? Will auntie insist on bringing up hurts from the past yet again? Will grandad embarrass everyone by drinking too much again? Will grandma feel obliged to moralise about one of the kid’s lifestyle? In fact, mixing all these potential toxins together, and adding a dash of alcohol to help things along, is surely a recipe for a poisonous day. How could we even imagine that, somehow, by some miracle, the day might turn out okay, let alone perfect?

The ultimate reality we need to face is that Christmas is *not* perfect, never has been, nor ever will be. For every person who passes a happy day, there’s another for whom the day is full of pain or conflict or loneliness or sadness. Many people who live on their own spend Christmas with family members or friends, but many don’t have that opportunity, and the day is purpose-made to ensure they feel their loneliness and isolation more acutely than ever. For people who have recently been bereaved, the absence of a loved one, especially at that first

Christmas, makes the sense of loss even more profound. Families with fractured relationships can spend the day walking on eggshells trying to avoid conflict – not always successfully – then heave a mighty sigh of relief once it’s over again for another year.

That’s not to mention the homeless, for whom – were it not for the wonderful ministrations of a great many charities – Christmas would be no more than a poignant reminder of their deprivation and alienation. And so many other people in situations of suffering and privation and despair. No, Christmas is far from perfect.



Is it any wonder that, for many people, the far more enjoyable day is, in fact, Boxing Day, *not* because of the frenzy of post-Christmas sales, but simply because Christmas is over again, and the wounds can start to heal over again? On Boxing Day we can begin dealing with the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder reawakened by our unperfect Christmas Day.

How did Christmas get like this? Why have we invested such unrealistic expectations in this single day of the year? I have no answer to those questions, but there’s one thing that is crystal clear: our expectations for the perfect Christmas have nothing whatsoever to do with the Christian festival that, these days, is often little more than a subtext to the commercialised worldly extravaganza we call “Christmas”. Nothing in our faith suggests that Christmas should be in any way whatsoever perfect!

Within the Church at Christmas, we recall the nativity stories that come to us from the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Even then, we pretty them up and sanitise them, transforming them into children’s pageants with smiling faces and splendid costumes. But the stories that are told in those two gospels aren’t like that at all. There’s nothing pretty – or childish – about the Christmas they describe. They are gritty

in the extreme. A young heavily pregnant unmarried woman and her partner find themselves without anywhere to spend the cold night. They end up in an animals' stable, amidst all the cattle and their excrement and mess. There, the young woman gives birth, without, apparently, the assistance of a midwife or anyone else with experience. The whole thing is unspeakably awful. It's the kind of tragic scene that would appal us were we to see it on *Sixty Minutes* or *Four Corners*.

We may or may not take literally these accounts of Jesus' birth, but the point is that when those two gospel writers

about *imperfection*.

As those who follow Jesus Christ, we should know better than to aspire to that perfect Christmas. We know that the world is not perfect. We know that Christmas is all about the fact that the world *isn't* perfect. We should not expect a perfect Christmas – ever. Instead, we should know that, for many, Christmas will be a hard, a painful, a lonely time. We should be ready for the reality, and ready to look past the delusional glitz of the world's "perfect" day. For that is where we'll find God at work.

When our Editor speaks of "balancing the joys of Christ-



mas with the pain it brings to some," she has placed us squarely in the centre of a Christmas that is real. There is indeed pain, for some or perhaps more many. That is who we are. And there is also great joy. It's not the joy of gift-giving, extravagant meals and Santa Claus – although those things do no harm if they are kept in perspective. Nor is it the joy of family and friends – although they can indeed be a joy. It's the joy of knowing, and celebrating, the mighty act of God, reaching into his creation with love that is beyond our ability to comprehend. The balance required of us at Christmas is between acknowl-

sought to portray the circumstances in which Jesus came into the world, they did not conjure up a perfect picture. They came up with a picture of squalor and deprivation and hardship. They presented a picture that is starkly confronting.

If that's the early Church's understanding of the first Christmas, it's hard to see how we have moved from that to our aspirations for a Christmas that is just so perfect. Somewhere along the way we've just got it all terribly wrong.

Not just historically wrong, but theologically wrong too, and that's more troubling. After all, if the world were the perfect place we try to pretend it is at Christmas time, then there would have been no reason for God to act in the person of Jesus Christ. It was because the loving and merciful God looked upon his creatures with such tenderness and compassion – his creatures who were so enmeshed in the tragedy of their broken lives – that God reached out with love and mercy and grace to bring healing where there was suffering, forgiveness where there was condemnation, hope where there was despair, life where there was only death. God acted *because* the world was, and remains, so far from perfect. Christmas is

edging the suffering of the world, and exultantly praising God for his act of love and mercy.

I think we can be sure that, were Jesus unexpectedly to appear in our midst at Christmas, we probably wouldn't need to set an extra place at our perfect luncheon tables. Because that's not where we'd find Jesus. We would find him in the homeless shelters, helping to serve a festive meal to those in need, staffing a Lifeline phone to bring succour to those in despair, befriending those left to their loneliness and despair as the world looks the other way, chatting to those whose addictions have isolated them from the warmth and security of family and friends, reassuring victims of domestic abuse who have fled into the terrifying unknown of escaping.

Christmas is good news for everyone; but to those of us indulging in our perfect Christmases, the good news pretty much escapes us. It's for those caught in the terribly imperfect Christmas that is the reality of human life that the good news of Christmas matters most. For the Son of God came into a world that was so far from perfect that only God could bring hope and life.

Alan Harper OAM

What Christmas



a sixth former at High School in the UK we debated whether Christmas was getting too commercialized, and I rather think the debate is still going on.

In churches and schools, we built manger scenes, sang carols, read lessons and raised money for those less fortunate. I wonder how many colourful shepherds and kings are scattered in storage boxes and attics around the world. In houses and gardens, we decorated for Christmas, took photos of the robin perched on the garden spade and (as it was in UK) prayed for snow on Christmas Day (which rarely came by the way).

Much of the world struggles with Christmas – trying to find a balance between celebrating the true meaning of Christmas, acknowledging those for whom Christmas can be a painful and lonely time, whilst at the same time, enjoying the festivities, family, presents and holiday activities.

For myself, I have always been a working person, work that has necessitated being busy right up to Christmas Eve in most instances - dashing home late with the shopping, tired, hungry, and not in a very 'christmas' mood I would have to confess. I have dropped money into charities, contributed to parcels for the homeless, and stopped by to sing carols.

Hence I make no apologies that Christmas for me, means unwinding, relaxing and indulging in a lot of favourite music over the week and on Christmas day

itself, the focus is on mostly sacred music.

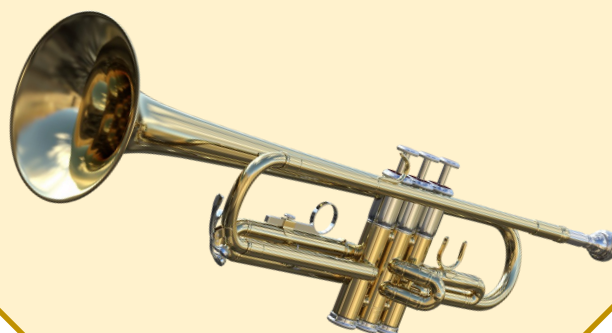
On Christmas Eve, I listen to traditional Carols whilst wrapping presents in half light, enjoying the flickering shadows of Christmas tree lights. Christmas morning is spent preparing lunch singing along to the entire Messiah plus another great favourite, Andrew Lloyd Webber's Requiem - the 'Pie Jesu' being far too high for my voice, but I have a go. Wonderful feeling.

The first glass of champagne is accompanied by the Monteverdi Vespers – those magnificent opening bars (musical ones !!) that herald wondrous things to come and as the afternoon wears on, we may turn to some Bach and later still, easy Jazz.

So, Christmas, a time for making room for the concerns of the world, welcoming a new life but including some 'best' experiences as so well expressed by Charles Dickens in A Christmas Carol:

"For it is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas when its mighty Founder was a child himself."

Jennet Cunningham



means to me

In the world as it is today, Christmas has a veneer of happiness and joy which masks and blurs its true meaning.

Retailers decorate spaces with sometimes meaningless symbols; city streets and shop windows are adorned with glittering reminders of secular festivity. I like to take the time in Advent and at Christmas to reflect on the one true God-given gift of Christmas: the birth of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Jesus' life and the sacrifice of His death, means that we are no longer bound by rules, dictates and standards – and that we are blessed, forgiven and have eternal life when we pass from this mortal life.

As December approaches each year, I am always pleased to think of Christmas as a time of rebirth and renewal: a time when we can be thankful to God for all of His blessings to us. A time to pause and reflect on what God's gift at Christmas really means and how Jesus can and does change our lives.

James Williams



In addition to celebrating the birth of Jesus and spending time with family, there are many things that I like about the season of Christmas; including decorations,

Christmas Lego building and of course, Boxing Day. The thing I like most about the Christmas decorations is that I get to help put up the tree. This year after helping with the tree, I was a bit preoccupied with building the Lego wreath and the Lego Christmas tree. That links us to the Christmas Lego building. Usually on Christmas Day, I allocate a few of my hours to building Lego. So at 5 am, I jump into my parents' bed and wake them up so I can start opening presents to hopefully start building Lego. Finally on Boxing Day, I get to really play with my presents because of Christmas lunch and attending Church the day before.

That is what I like most about Christmas.

Kurt Hunter



*Tony Hisgett :
Creative Commons*

What Christmas

What

do I like best about the season of Christmas? Well, I enjoy many things about the Christmas season, but I will limit myself to three.

First and foremost, I love an extended season where we're reminded of Jesus and what He brings to our lives. While I try every day to reflect on and be guided by our Father and His Son, Christmas provides an in-your-face reminder of the birth of Jesus and how everything changed for us as humans once He was born.

Secondly, I love the extra time with family that the Christmas season brings. Time to go to the beach and swim, time for board games, time to go to new places and return to places we enjoy as a family and of course, time together building Lego; which Kurt and I enjoy.

Lastly, I enjoy all the special food, both preparing it and eating it. Christmas recipes from my family in the US, mixed with traditional Australian Christmas foods, provide me with beautiful memories of previous Christmases with my family who have passed and thoughts for family who are still with us.

Scott Brunelle



Agnes

M. Pharo, a talented writer, artist, musician and grandmother has become well known for

her quote: "What is Christmas? It is tenderness for the past, courage for the present and hope for the future. It is a fervent wish that every cup may overflow with blessings, rich and eternal and that every path may lead to peace."

As we celebrate the birth of Christ this December and listen to the familiar carols and songs that herald in the Season, recollections and associations from the past often spring to mind. Thoughts of family members no longer present, who greeted us on Christmas Day, the traditional festive fare shared and gifts exchanged, evoke a sense of fond remembrance and tenderness for a time now past, but living on in memory.

While Christmas in the Southern Hemisphere is usually celebrated in the long sunlit days typical of an Australian Summer, courage for the present is certainly what is needed for the millions of people facing Christmas in dire circumstances who are the victims of war or the ravages of nature, those separated from family and those deprived of basic necessities such as shelter and warmth.

Despite uncertain times ahead, the quote of Agnes Pharo reminds us that we are sustained by the Christmas message of hope for the future and a path that leads to peace, as also echoed in the words of Zechariah: "...through the tender mercy of our God when the day shall dawn upon us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:78, 79).

Romany White

means to me

We happily prepare for Christmas in our comfortable homes where food will be plentiful, and presents, laughter and tinsel will abound. For most of us this is a picture that probably continues from our childhood days. Christmas is an exciting time for kids. I don't really remember Christmas as a child as it was not very important in my parents' home. We did go to church but, looking back, I really think it was more about 'what one does' than an act of joyous worship. But Christmas with my own young family was very special. Watching my kids unwrap their gifts, and seeing the light in their eyes and their joy in playing with something new, gave great satisfaction and happiness to Alan and me. We would go to church and the kids loved the carols.

We had a particular minister, Doug, who was an artist. One year he painted a white on black nativity scene as the service progressed, filling in each detail as the birth story unfolded. He made the story come alive and we were able to witness, first hand, in a sense, the miracle, the adoration and the joy of this special event. It was inspirational, and some thirty years later my family still remembers it.

Of course, the reality of the birth was far from the sanitised version that Doug painted, and that we see on Christmas cards. Mary and Joseph were poor, Jesus was born in a barn among animals. There was nothing spectacular in this, **except** that it is spectacular. For the birth of a baby in a poor, non-descript setting was the foundation for an amazing future – for him, his ministry, for us.

So how do we bring Christmas to the poor, the homeless, the disenfranchised, the victims of flood, fire, famine, war, who will not have the Christmas we will experi-

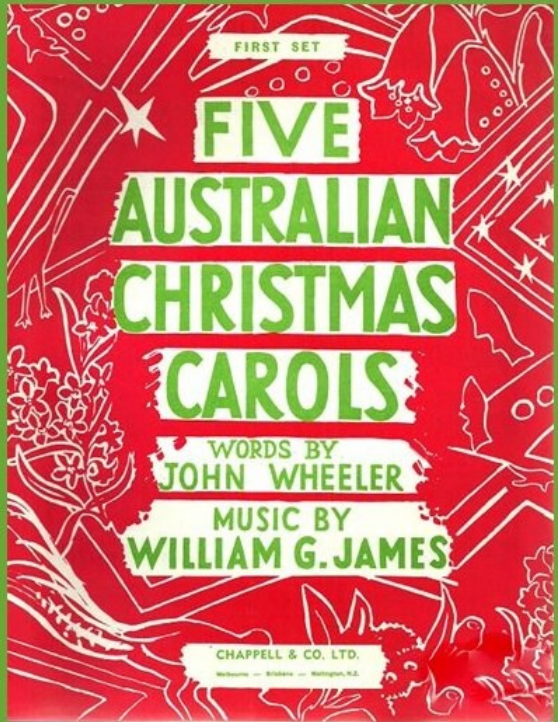
ence? In extreme storm-damaged and decimated Eugowra, Christmas is the last thing spoken about by anyone I talked with during my deployments there. Those who were still in town were desperately hanging in there, focussing on the clean up and applying for whatever financial aid they qualified for. But everyone was grateful for assistance from support services, and commented that the chaplains had made such a difference. They hoped that the chaplains would continue to be available well into the future. The opportunity to have someone listen to their problems helped them, in a small way, to begin to heal. They may not (want to) celebrate the birth of Jesus, but as Christians it is our love, compassion and peace that bring Christmas to people who do not celebrate as we do in our homes and churches.

Christmas is tenderness for the past, courage for the present, hope for the future: we celebrate and are thankful for the birth over two thousand years ago; the birth gives us courage for the present in good and bad times, in sadness and happiness; and the birth and Jesus' subsequent death and resurrection give us hope for the future of a life eternal. Our strength and courage for the present, in the ways we love and support others, are the Christmas gift we give to those less fortunate than ourselves. I am very grateful that I am blessed to have such a wonderful Christmas, but equally blessed and humbled that I have been able to bring some solace to those who will not have my Christmas.

Lauris Harper



Christmas Bush



Advent is that time of expectant waiting and preparation for both the Christmas celebration of Jesus' birth and also looking forward, with anticipation, to the return of Christ at His Second Coming.

Recently, to conclude the Worship Service on one Sunday morning during Advent, we sang the lovely Australian Christmas Carol "Christmas Bush for His Adorning", by John Wheeler & William G. James.

*"All the bells are gaily ringing.
Birds in ev'ry tree are singing.
Let us in this golden weather,
Gather Christmas bush together.*

*Christ is born! The angels thunder
Thro' the heavens their tale of wonder,
While we pick for His adorning,
Christmas bush this hallow'd morning."*

Hearing and singing these words transported me back to Christmases of my childhood in the 1960s when through the ABC radio broadcasts, the Australian Carols became very familiar to many Australian school children.

These carols were written by John Wheeler, a most gifted, often overlooked songwriter, who worked as a scriptwriter with the ABC with the composer William Garnet James. It seems that until 1948, when their first set of "Five Australian Christmas Carols" were published, no one had ever thought of writing carols fashioned for Australia with traditional Christmas themes being given "outback" settings.

This set of evocative carols, which included "The Carol of the Birds", "The Three Drovers", "The Silver Stars are in the Sky", "Christmas Day" & "Christmas Bush for His Adorning", centred on the hot, Australian summer and Australia's wealth of unique animal life, whilst simultane-



For His adorning

ously marking the joyous events of the nativity. When first published, they were embraced by choirs and churches across the nation and in 1954 two further sets of carols followed, bringing the total number to fifteen. The music score cover designs featured Australian animals, plants and the Southern Cross.

James & Wheeler's Christmas carols were also well received outside Australia. In 1957 they were performed in London's St Paul's Cathedral and not long after, on an American television Carol Service.

Highlighted in the carol "*Christmas Bush for His Adorning*", the Christmas Bush is one of the few native species that produces flowers over summer (hence the common name 'Christmas Bush'). The masses of creamy coloured flowers form at the end of each branch and develop into kidney shaped seeds that are capsulated in a purse-shaped seed pod. These capsules develop in autumn and stay on the plant for a number of months. The flowers are insect pollinated and are one of the most important shrubs for attracting butterflies, spiders and beetles. It is thought that the seeds were collected, roasted and ground into flour by the Aboriginal people and the wood of larger species used for boomerangs. The perfumed flowers were also used for decoration or could be soaked in water to extract the nectar and make a sweet drink.

When researching information about "*Christmas Bush for His Adorning*", I came upon an interesting article by Monica Ibrahim titled "The Christmas Bush and the Mystery of Christmas: Australian Natural Contemplation" in which she talks about how elements from the natural world can be used to symbolise a spiritual truth. For example, the trifoliate leaves of the Christmas Bush bear witness to the one God in Trinity for most of the year. The cluster of white star flowers that emerge in October, point to the star that set the three wise men on their journey. In the middle of November, the white flowers shrivel to form seed pods encircled by the red sepals recalling the baby carried in the Virgin's womb. The transformation of the flowers from white to red signifies God becoming human and the five petals foreshadow Christ's five wounds on the Cross. Finally, the fiery red tree that in December spectacularly stands out in the Australian landscape reminds us that it is through the shedding of Christ's

blood that we have our salvation. The Christmas Bush, like the angels, announces the coming Nativity, calling us to prepare our hearts to receive the Christ Child.

*Christ has conquered Evil's pow'r
Hear the bells rock ev'ry tower.
Birds and beasts lift up their voices,
Freed at last the world rejoices.*

*Onward with triumphant chorus,
Following the road before us,
Singing thro' the golden weather,
Gath'ring Christmas bush together.*

Graham Penn



All-age worship



On the 11th December, the third Sunday in Advent, All-Age Worship took place at St Stephen's, drawing a large number of members, friends and especially families with children to our church. We welcomed two special visitors from the Act for Peace organisation, Florina Xavier and Janet Cousens, to this time of worship. After the organ prelude and the acknowledgement of Country, the choir entered the worship centre and we sang one of the verses and the chorus of "The First Nowell". Kurt Hunter lit the candle of joy, the third Advent candle, and this was followed by the Welcome and Announcements, led by Pastor Kathryn Lynch. The Rev Ken Day read Psalm 150: 1-6, and the children were encouraged to come to the front pew and choose some Christmas bells or a special Christmas headband. Everyone then enjoyed singing those great Christmas favourites "Jingle Bells" and "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer".

In the next part of the service, the Rev Ken showed a video which was appreciated by all present, but especially by the children, as in this screen presentation, children acted out the different rôles in the Christmas story. I think that I can safely say that we all saw the familiar parts of the story of the birth of Jesus with new eyes. Following the singing of the lovely Christmas hymn "The Virgin Mary had a Baby Boy", all of the children present were invited to go into the old vestry where there were special activities organised for them.

The congregation then had the great privilege of hearing Florina Xavier speak about the work of the Act for Peace Organisation in southern India, and especially in Chennai where Florina comes from. Florina recounted to us in particular the stories of two Sri Lankan men who had sought refuge in the south of India, following the violence and unrest in their homeland. Thanks to Act for Peace, these two refugees were able to turn their lives around and move from the refugee camps to freedom and meaningful work. However, both men opted to work for the betterment of other Sri Lankan refugees, and one even moved back to his homeland to take part in the rebuilding of his country. In her moving speech, Florina assured us of all that is being accomplished in southern India, thanks to the generosity of Australians who donate to Act for Peace, not only in regard to assistance being provided to refugees but also in other fields, such as the health of mothers and babies. Florina concluded her speech with a prayer in Tamil, which included these words (in the English version):

As children of God, we will share this year's bowl with people who are displaced, oppressed or living in poverty. God, may their lives be filled with hope and peace.

and . . .

At this particular point in the service, something very unexpected happened! The Rev Ken invited all present to come up to the front pew, to pick up a paper bag and put a sticker on it – and then fill each bag with a variety of items including a chocolate bar, a tissue pack, a Christmas gift card, a packet of Shapes, a St Stephen's pen....These gift bags are to be given to the disadvantaged people who come to the Early Bird Café at St Stephen's for breakfast five mornings a week. The response to Ken's invitation was enthusiastic and everyone who was able to do so came forward to pack one of these special gift bags. Whilst this was taking place, the choir delighted us all with a wonderful rendition of "Deck the Halls".

There was one more surprise awaiting all present as we were called to come to the front and be part of a St Stephen's Christmas photo! Again the pews were almost empty as everyone who wished to take part came forward to be photographed. After the singing of the final Christmas song, "Everybody likes to take a Holiday" and the concluding verse "All glory be to God on High", the choristers processed out, followed by the Rev Ken and our visitors. Members of the congregation remained to listen to a beautiful rendition of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" played magnificently by our very own organist, Mark Quarmby.

Most members and friends of our church family stayed on afterwards for what proved to be an amazing Christmas Brunch. Everyone sat at "The Long Table" and enjoyed a delicious main course of specially prepared ham and turkey, with hot vegetables and appetising salads, all done according to the secret recipes of Margaret Horscroft and Judith Barton (secret recipes which, by the way, they are happy to share!) Lovely Christmas desserts were to follow – Christmas pudding with ice-cream or custard was the favourite, but there were also summer berries and ice-cream plus a variety of mouth-watering slices. Special thanks are due especially to our Hospitality Convenor, Margaret, and to Judith, who put such a great deal of effort into providing us all with a wonderful brunch. When it came to assistance in the kitchen and in the serving of the meal, there was a small but effective team of helpers on hand, which included Scott Brunelle and Jenny Fisher.

What a fantastic Sunday this was at St Stephen's! An All Age Service with so many surprises....the beautiful Christmas decorations in the church..... wonderful music.....and then fellowship and friendship shared over a festive meal. The presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst brought us joy – but reminded us at the same time of the other message of the day, and this Christmas, we certainly won't forget all those we can help through Act for Peace.

Janice Dawson



Christmas brunch





Award for Excellence

Rotary International's Award for Excellence in Service to Humanity recognizes non-Rotarians who have demonstrated exemplary humanitarian service in accordance with Rotary's ideals, recognised worldwide as "Service Above Self".

Our very own Minister, the Rev Ken Day, was chosen during 2021-22 for this award from the Rotary District (which spans Sydney, the Illawarra and Macarthur regions) because of his remarkable commitment to people in our CBD who are homeless, disadvantaged and/or facing adversities and challenging times.

Our Early Bird Café Thanksgiving Dinner, which was held on Thursday 20th October 2022, took place in the Ferguson Hall where Tom Walsh, Chairman of the City Community Care Incorporation expanded on the growth of the Early Bird Café, which started out with only a small group of volunteers providing breakfasts to people living rough in Wynyard Park. Now the Early Bird Café is supported by over 16 different corporate organisations, providing breakfast to the CBD's disadvantaged people every weekday morning, serving anything between 100 to 150 meals per day. The Early Bird Café continues through the highs and

lows of the COVID pandemic and beyond and due consideration is being given to opening the Early Bird Café on Saturdays.

The Rotary District Governor, Dr Janice Hall presented the award to Ken for his amazing vision and leadership, who with the support of the Church Council and Elders at



St Stephen's, has embraced this wonderful ministry and service to the disadvantaged of the Sydney CBD. Ken is also a regular volunteer as part of this service ministry.



Of course, the Early Bird Café would not operate without the passion, dedication and commitment of our volunteers, of which St Stephen's has many. We are a team whose members not only serve meals to the disadvantaged from the front steps of church building, but also behind the scenes, organise the garbage bins, take home dirty tea towels to be washed, clean up Monday to Friday the various items left in front of the church building and wash down the steps to get rid of spillages. Sometimes, people walk in off the street, where we can engage them in conversation, offer a "cuppa" or give them warm clothing or a pair of shoes to wear. A big thanks is also given to the members and friends of St Stephen's who knit beanies, scarves and fingerless gloves and bring in blankets to distribute.

in Service to Humanity

Yes, indeed our Minister, with the Church Council and Elders and all members of our St Stephen's can be proud in this award. Thanks Be to God! - The Good News of Jesus working amongst us!

In Matthew 25:35-37, we read these words:

“For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me”.

These are indeed words of inspiration for all who work at the Early Bird Café and also for those who support this wonderful example of Christian service in action.

Judith Barton



SYDNEY
OPEN
5-6
NOV

SYDNEY
OPEN

@ St. Stephen's

Do you remember the first time you walked through the doors of St Stephen's? Do you recall the occasion? Do you remember your reaction to seeing the huge stained glass window at the front of the church? Or the metres of rich dark timber? Or the magnificent high ceilings with the lanterns hanging down to provide light?

On Sunday 6th November, over a thousand visitors to St Stephen's were able to have their own first-time experience. These visitors were part of the Sydney Open festival, a two-day event that offered people a chance to explore the city's most historic and significant buildings, religious structures and architectural monuments.

Before and after the regular Sunday worship service, the St Stephen's church was open to people to walk through, take photographs, or just sit and look at stained glass windows and architecture. They were also able to hear our Choral Director Huw and the choir rehearsing, and the organ being played by our Organist Mark Quarmby with one of his young students. Pastor Kathryn played the carillon during the day and gave a number of floor talks about the history of the church building and congregation, and the historical and liturgical significance of the furnishings.

This year, the weekend of Sydney Open was beautifully sunny, and the church certainly looked its best with light filling the sanctuary, and the colours in the stained glass helping the building feel alive. This was St Stephen's first time participating in Sydney Open, and it was clear that visitors were thrilled at this opportunity to visit the church, and interested in learning more about the life of the church and its people.

Churches, cathedrals and abbeys are popular tourist attractions in cities throughout the world. What is a trip to London without a visit to Westminster Abbey or St Paul's Cathedral? What is a trip to Paris without stopping at Notre Dame or Sacré Coeur on Montmartre? Travelers return

home with fond memories of hearing the choirs rehearse, or organists practising for an upcoming service. For people who follow the Christian faith there is a sense of familiarity and also sacredness; feeling at home the way a Christian does in the house of God, and the awe of knowing that countless Christians throughout the centuries and generations have worshiped that same God in that place as well. Even for non-believers, churches and sacred spaces evoke something that other tourist attractions do not.



In fact, 'religious tourism' has taken place since the dawn of civilisation. Pilgrims have travelled to pay homage to gods and saints at sacred places all over the world. Pilgrims to Christian sites, Muslim sites and Buddhist sites merge with non-religious tourists on every day of the week, some to participate in the sacred rituals and some to observe with a curiosity and a sense of the strangeness of it.

Religious tourism is an important area of tourism for many reasons. It allows people to explore and connect to faith and religion in a way they might otherwise not be able to. For the religious sites, it can be an important source of income, and also a way to connect with an increasingly secular population. However, it is not without its challenges. Those sites that regularly encounter pilgrims and tourists have unique opportunities, but also unique challenges

Uniting Church

in managing the needs of groups with different needs and expectations. Guardians and guides are needed to watch the site and ensure that visitors can move safely and appropriately through the space, experiencing the activities that are taking place there without hindering the important spiritual work that happens there. There is also the need to financially maintain the spaces, which is an important consideration as older buildings and monuments take specialist (and expensive) work to repair and restore them.

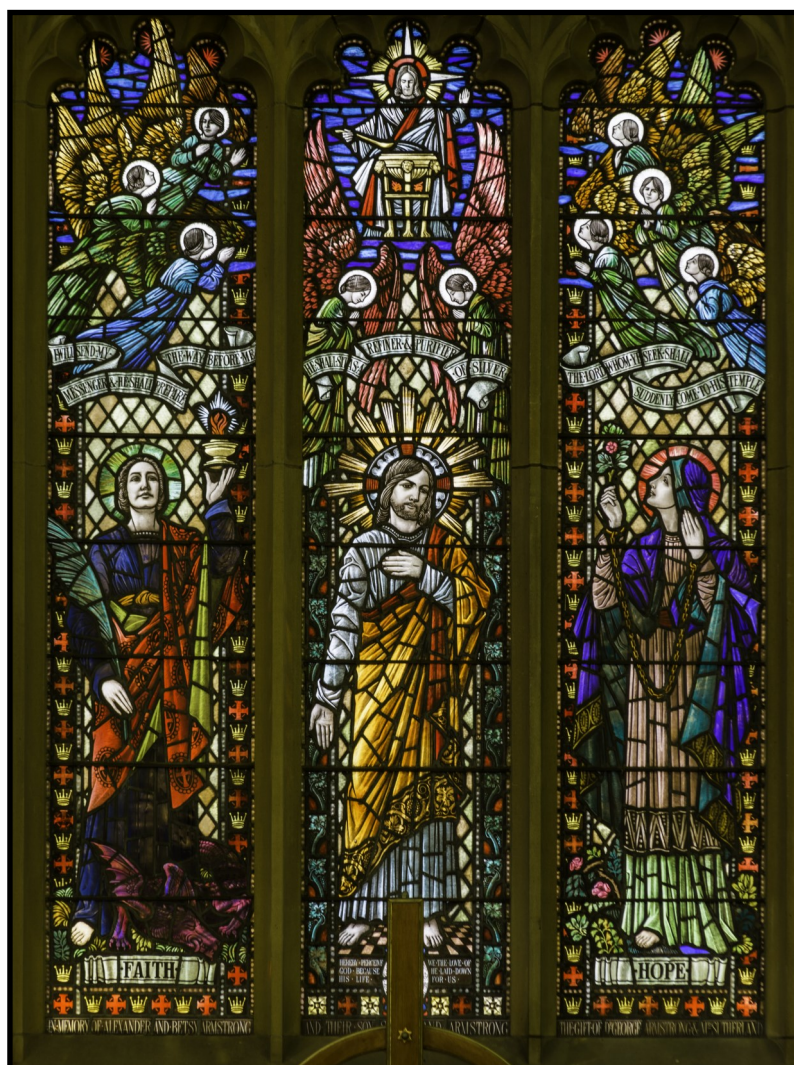
For St Stephen's, this was an opportunity for us to continue to connect with the people in our local community. We were able to tell the story of our faith through 'floor talks', answering visitors' questions, and explaining the stories of the lives of the Bible characters whose images are in our windows. Many people asked questions about the Uniting Church in Australia, and how we were the same as (and different from) other Christian denominations and church congregations that they had experiences with.

It was also a chance to invite people to become part of the life of our congregation and its activities. Visitors were given flyers about Christmas at St Stephen's and Jazz Behind the Green Door. We hope that many of the people we met for the first time at Sydney Open will return to be part of our congregation at Christmas or at other events and times throughout the year. It would be very exciting to see these one-time visitors become regular worshipping members of our congregation.

If you missed St Stephen's at Sydney Open this year, we hope you'll be able to catch us next year – or come and visit us any Sunday throughout the year, and at special times like Christmas and Easter.

Sydney Open is a programme of Sydney Living Museums, and takes place in buildings through Sydney on the first weekend of November each year. More information about Sydney Living Museums can be found on their website.

<https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/>



Kathryn Lynch



In May this year, Alan and I did a driving holiday through the Central West of NSW, a part of the country we love dearly. The landscape is vast and very Australian in nature – rocky outcrops, fields of varying crops and colours, herds of sheep and cattle, wonderful rusty buildings and cattle chutes which I love photographing. You feel God in this landscape.

Part of our trip took in the town of Eugowra, 300 plus kilometres west of Sydney, on Wiradjuri land. Eugowra is a town with a population of about 800, and one main street with a few side streets. Very small! It was 1815 when the first white explorers surveyed the area, and 1834 when pastoral settlement began. The town has an interesting history; most notably Frank Gardiner and his gang ambushed the Forbes-Orange Cobb & Co coach at Escort Rock on Escort Way, one of the main roads into town. Granite from the town was used in the building of new Parliament House. Much of this history and that of the surrounding areas is celebrated in a series of murals around town – on the sides of buildings, on billboards and on pediments.



For two weeks in November and December I was deployed as a chaplain in Eugowra by the D(isaster) R(ecovery) C(haplaincy) N(etwork). The town Alan and I saw in May this year is a mere shadow of its former self, though thankfully most of the murals that we loved have survived. But the storm damage of mid-November has decimated the town. Between 80% and 90% of the town's buildings and homes have been damaged, and possibly half of the homes will be uninhabitable. The ferocity and the size of the storm damage took everyone by surprise. (I do not use the word "flood" as there is contention about its definition in relation to what happened and how that affects people's insurance claims – at least that is for those who could afford insurance at up to \$3,000 a month!!) Where water had been merely ankle deep, twenty minutes later it was chest height. People clung to cars, poles, anything to stop being swept away. About a third of the townspeople were on their roofs for hours waiting to be rescued. As with Lismore, people spoke about the "tsunami", but this one was yellow because the canola crop was about to be harvested. Where harvesting had already occurred, the stalks were washed down, creating a sharp, intricately woven mesh that swept away homes, water tanks, hay bales, fencing, and cars, and ended up in some places in the tops of trees. Some homes were swept off their footings and came to rest hundreds of meters down the road, some even wedged in trees. Unlike the Lismore flooding, this reached into paddocks, sheds and homes that had never been inundated before. The locals had initially been unperturbed, because the warning they had received was 'normal'. Yet the resulting inundation reached 11.2 metres, about a half a metre higher than the estimate for a one-in-five-thousand-year flood event.

Despite this devastation, resilience levels in town were very high, with neighbours helping each other, people from surrounding towns coming in and offering their assistance, and caravans being donated from all over and left with townspeople so that they had accommodation. There was a real Dunkirk spirit. The volume of tradespeople surprised me as I thought it would take forever to get their services. Interior walls of houses were being demolished or partially demolished to get rid of mould and to allow air to circulate once the mud had

been scraped off. Even full brick homes suffered severe damage and the tide marks could be clearly seen. One such house was owned by an 84 year old woman. On first returning to her home, she didn't feel that she could stay. But a week later when I was speaking with her, she was talking about how her grandchildren with trades experience were already helping her plan the re-design and improvements to the house that would make it more suitable for her lifestyle, and she was very definite that she would return there.

Unfortunately in times of disaster and high stress, some will take advantage: a fridge meant for a couple was stolen from the back lane before they had time to get it inside; free food bank items were taken by people who were not part of the community; scammers abounded; two nights' emergency accommodation at a B&B cost \$4,500.00.

The DRCN chaplains stand beside people and hear their stories in situations such as this. But some of the unexpected results of conversations are not about the floods at all, but about other traumas in their lives that have re-surfaced because of this latest event – domestic violence, childhood abuse, war zone experiences, family loss . . . the list goes on. As one lady said to me, "It is easier to talk to a complete stranger than to talk to someone you know or who is close to you." That is so true because whatever is on their mind or in their hearts can be vocalised without fear. I know that God called me to this work, and I am so privileged to be able to do it.

Lauris Harper



November 2022 (left); May 2022 (right). I am standing above the 8' marker which is under the bridge; the tree (below) is in front of me and much taller. Note the carpenter's horse lodged in the tree.



THE BACK PAGE

Sunday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Friday
10:00am Worship	1:00pm Reflection, prayer, scripture, music, communion 2nd Tuesday RECOMMENCES 31 JANUARY 2023	2 nd Wednesday of the month 5:30 – 7:00pm Jazz, supper, soul RECOMMENCES FEBRUARY	1:10pm – 1:50pm Friday Music RECOMMENCES FEBRUARY



For unto You is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which
is Christ the Lord. (*Luke 2: 11*)

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