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CHRISTMAS IS FOR EVERYONE

Bishop John Henderson

Around 1970, when I was a teenager, my family and I worshipped in a new Lutheran church in Canberra. Most of the people there had only recently come to this very new area in a very new city. There weren't many people in the churches, but those that were there grew closer as a result. Our church was like an extended family, and the members shared lots of festivals and meals together during the year.

I remember an elderly Austrian couple who used to arrange our Advent evenings. Advent is the short season before Christmas celebrated in many churches. It's a time to think about the return of Jesus in glory at the end of time. Christians are happy to think about it because it means that God is faithful and will keep his promises about a new heaven and a new earth. The Jesus who returns is not just Lord and Judge; he is also our brother and our Saviour.

This Austrian couple arranged our Advent evenings with as many of the traditional trappings that they could manage from their homes before the tragedy the war brought upon them. Back in the '20s they lived in a land of snow and ice, mountains and long, dark winter nights. In our small hall in the '70s they would recreate that atmosphere of happier, more innocent days with decorations, music, and food. Each year our group of assorted Australian Lutherans would be swept up into what nowadays we would call a multicultural experience, although that word hadn't been invented then.

That experience is fairly limited, since the theme of the night came from Europe. Today the Christian church, however, remains one of the most multicultural, pluralistic communities on earth. At some time in the last 2,000 years faith in Jesus as the Christ has crossed every ethnic, language, and cultural barrier. The fastest growing churches are in Africa, the most ancient churches are in the Middle East, and the most missionary minded churches are often in Korea. Here in Australia we have tended to forget that, but with recent migration, and now many refugees coming from all over the world, we have been reminded of not only how diverse the human race is, but also of how diverse the Christian faith is.

The way Christians express themselves; the languages they use, the style of their worship, and the cultures they use to express themselves, varies all around the world. It might be one vast family of God, but it's not the same everywhere. It's really good for us to know this and understand it. As things change in our part of the world, it's good to know that there are plenty of others out there who are willing to work with us, pray for us, and celebrate Jesus with us. Many of these are people we haven't even heard of before.

We live in a world where there are not just Christians, but also many other religions. That's hardly new. It's right there in the Christmas and Epiphany stories in the Bible. While Jesus might have been born to a Jewish family, there were plenty of other people and religions around the place. These are represented by the Wise Men, or Magi, who came from the East and worshipped Jesus with their gifts of frankincense, gold, and myrrh. We don't really know who they were, or where they came from, but they certainly weren't Jews and they certainly didn't come from Jerusalem. They are, however, as much a part of the story as the shepherds and the angels.

The place where Jesus was born was very diverse. Different religions and peoples rubbed shoulders all the time. The census that caused Jesus to be born in Bethlehem was initiated by a pagan Roman emperor. The merchants who worked the trade routes than ran through Israel at

the time came from all the countries of the known world. They brought their religions, customs, and languages with them. Jesus grew up in Joseph's town of Nazareth, which was in Galilee, the hub of the trade routes. Some Jews from the south used this against him in his later ministry. There were so many races and religions in Galilee they thought that Jesus' Judaism might be corrupted.

Modern Australia is looking increasingly like the Israel that Jesus grew up in. The religion you might expect to be dominant hasn't got things all to itself. Some people might call Australia a Christian country, and Christians do thank God that their faith and traditions have had a major hand in shaping our laws and customs. But there have always been other religions in this land - traditional Indigenous religions since time immemorial and over the last 200 years or more, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam have co-existed, even if people didn't notice them much. Today, in a new international environment, they are becoming more noticed because issues of religion are demanding attention in a way that hasn't happened here before.

Some people think this new awareness of our diversity means that our Christianity, and what is sometimes called our 'Christian heritage', is slipping away from us. People are afraid of what this change will bring. There is starting to be resistance. Sometimes there is prejudice and discrimination. Now is time for Australians to be thoughtful, and careful, about the way we manage change in our country's customs and laws. It's certainly time for Christians to stand up and be counted – counted for their honesty, compassion, generosity, and willingness to care for the vulnerable.

Now, more than ever, it matters that Christians should live the life that Jesus Christ would have them live. He didn't live in a pure religious environment, but in a confused world that was a cross sampling of many cultures and religions. In Australia today we need to know that the love of God doesn't change if the world around me changes. Just as Jesus loved his neighbour, and gave his life for us all, so we are called to love our neighbour, and treat every person with fairness and decency, whether they be Buddhist, Jewish, a Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Baha'i, Muslim or Christian.

Inclusion, not exclusion, is the model of the New Testament. It can be a pretty tough call. It means changing my ways to work with many things that might not be our first choice. Just like that old Austrian couple in Canberra, it means practicing our faith, the gospel and our customs in what can, at times, feel like a foreign land. It means keeping the faith, believing in Jesus, and celebrating his birth, death, and resurrection, alongside many people who do not believe in these things, and yet working with them in love.

God's Christmas message is for the world. Jesus came for the world. The world isn't just you and me – it's all of God's creation, and all of God's people. We have always known that – and today we are being given a chance in modern Australia to show that we know it's true – Jesus really was born for you, and for me, and for every human being. God's perfect love; born for the world, born for us all.

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