

# Christmas is for you

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 25 December, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Jason John

Christmas Day A

**Luke 2:1-20; Matthew 2:1-12; Contemporary Reading:  
BC:AD by U A Fanthorpe**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGVszpHlvq8>

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Good morning everyone. It's good to be down here from Bellingen – we've more or less swapped one lot of smoke for another lot, but I notice although the rain has certainly helped with that a little bit. It's great to be here at Pitt St, and particularly in a place that messes around with the lyrics of the Christmas Carols, particularly last night I noticed that. Some kindred spirits here are organising their worship I think. I tend to get in trouble for that in Bellingen. People like to be able to sing what they know they are going to singing without having to look at the words. But it's good to see people messing round with that.

UME is Uniting Mission and Education, but you can ignore that because that's one restructure out of date. I now actually work for Uniting – still in kind of environmental advocacy. It's very similar ministry, it just keeps moving from funding puddle to funding puddle.

All of the gifts which I never got  
Well I guess that I don't miss them much.

Of all of the gifts that I've ever had  
The ones I love most are the touch  
Of a hand at my back and my feet on wet grass,  
and my babies' wet kiss on my cheek.

I can hardly believe,  
Though I guess I guess that they're right  
It'll be Christmas time in a week.

Because there's all those signs in the store  
that want us to buy more  
Telling us that they'll sell us love fast  
and they're all ten percent off but that's because they're all made of crap  
because they don't really want them to last.

All those signs in the store that want me to buy more  
To show my great love with some cash.  
Well, call me old fashioned but I'd rather show  
My wife that she's loved with a pash.

And my kids with a hug then a game on the rug  
because in the blink of an eye they'll both go  
So I'd rather be round now as much as I can  
Than working to pay back what I owe.

So how about this Christmas, we all stay in the black?  
Like the sun weathered skin of that Nazareth chap  
Who went on about money and the dangers of wealth  
For those trying to nurture their spiritual health

Let's give gifts of love, they don't send us broke  
Lots of big hugs (even us uptight blokes!)  
To those who want one, offer a kiss  
Let's celebrate love, not capitalist-myths.

How about all of you? What do you value? Who is someone in your life this year that you've really treasured? Who's been a gift to you? Someone you really value. It could be someone you know well. It could be someone who just had a comment for you that really helped you this year. It might be someone who wrote a book that was really meaningful to you.

I'm going to give you a minute to think about someone that's been a real gift to you this year. Then I'm going to invite you to talk about them to the person next to you. So make sure it's someone you're happy about it in a tic, so choose someone you're happy to talk about!

I'm going to give you two minutes each and I'll explain how that works, but for now, I'll just give you 20 seconds to think of someone who's been a real gift to you this year. Someone that you really treasure.

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I wonder what other people thought of that relationship you've just been talking about? Or the other friendships and people that you have in your lives?

I wonder if you've ever had a relationship which other people didn't get, or didn't approve of. Some relationship that caused inner turmoil because of your fear of external judgment?

Maybe you're old enough to have transgressed the catholic/protestant divide in the 50s - or even the 70s depending on where you live. Maybe your cultural backgrounds didn't match. Or one of you had a white collar, and one of you had a blue collar.

Maybe it was a love which dared not speak its name.

If so, you're in great company at Christmas time, and in the gospels as we'll see.

We start with Mary, a young, pregnant woman, who returns from a three month trip to her cousin, suddenly pregnant. A stoneable offense back then.

There's Joseph, who, in Matthew's gospel, knows that his first child isn't going to be his own. And who knows that everybody else is going to work out that it wasn't his too.

When they arrive at their family home for the census, there is "*no room for them*" and they have to sleep downstairs with the animals. Many a good Jewish family, having taken one look at Mary and done the maths, would have made them sleep downstairs with the animals as well.

Or maybe it was just that they knew what an outspoken rabble-rouser Mary was, with her hymns about tearing down the rich and lifting up the lowly and sending the rich away with nothing and filling the poor with good things. Best not to get too close to a firebrand like that when you're living in Roman occupied Israel in the middle of a census.

But, even if the family wasn't very approving or accommodating, the angels come along. They send shepherds with marvellous stories of visions of angels in the field to come down and visit them! But, of course they are shepherds and nobody trusted a shepherd back then. Shepherds were unclean. They were unacceptable. They were banned from the temple.

So when they come and start shouting about angels in the fields, they make Mary and Joseph and Jesus unclean and unacceptable as well. If you've ever befriended unacceptable people, or maybe if you're an unacceptable person who's dared to befriend other people, you're in great company at Christmas time.

What was God up to, using an unwed rebel mother and unclean shepherds to kick off this story? If we go with Matthew instead, of course, we get the three kings or three wise men. Except it's only the carol that talks about kings. Matthew's word is magi – the astrologers or sorcerers. We don't know if they were men, we don't know if there were three of them, we don't know if they were particularly wise.

What we do know is they brought gifts – which was good! Gold was a great start to things, but also myrrh which is the spice that you rub on dead bodies. Who brings a baby embalming fluid for its first birthday?

More importantly, all Jews knew that astrologers were an "*abomination to the Lord*"! It was prohibited to pay attention to them or be in their company. So, by letting them in, Mary and Joseph were breaking the law and at risk of being stoned to death. Again.

Some of us might know what it's like to have our relationships declared illegal or immoral. And, how many of us have been blessed by wisdom or by gifts from the wrong kind of people? How many of us are the "wrong kind of people," who have dared to share our wisdom with the world anyway?

Poor Jesus. You've got to feel for him. After being raised by this rabble-rousing mother and his overly tolerant father, who invite the unclean and the abominable to his birth, it's no wonder that so many of his relationships were wrong when he grew up.

He starts with the fisherman, who were pretty much guaranteed to be unclean, because of the unclean sea creatures they were likely to catch. He partied enough to be labelled a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of sinners – which is really just kind of judgy-speak for everyone who doesn't make the grade.

He ate with outcasts. He ate with the religious establishment. He ate with the Roman collaborators. Probably everybody judged Jesus for the company that he kept. He taught that those Roman collaborators, and the prostitutes, were going to get into the kingdom of heaven ahead of the pious religious leaders of his time.

He taught an anonymous woman at a well, even dared to be seen alone with her. Even though she was a half-caste mongrel Samaritan. (And we need to remember that his disciples, not much later in the story, were happy to burn a Samaritan village to the ground. That's how well they got along with each other.)

He also hung out with zealots like Simon. His dinner parties included the blind and lame (which was basically anyone that people assumed God was judging for their sin or their parents).

Even his mother ended up doubting him, and the family came along to take him away because they feared he'd gone out of his mind and he was embarrassing them.

There's many more examples, but I think that's probably enough!

Now, of course, it wasn't all bad. Jesus was reconciled to his mother. He ate and he drank and he told jokes, and his disciples became his friends.

So Christmas is for you...

If you're looking forward to a great day with family or friends, then Christmas is for you. If your family excels in being judgy, then Christmas is for you. If your partner has an unwanted surprise for you, Christmas is for you. If people judge you for the company you keep or judge you as being the wrong kind of company to keep, then Christmas is for you.

If you're too lefty or too righty - or your friends are, Christmas is for you.

If like Jesus you can see the good in a relationship that other people want to condemn, then I invite you to own it. To treasure it. Cherish it. Celebrate it - and share it with other people.

I want to finish with a poem about a gift I received nearly 20 years ago as my encouragement to you to share your gifts with the wider community as well. Pretty sure I remember this one!

I met this woman on a sexual harassment committee  
Which led to a dilemma cause  
I thought she looked really pretty,  
but did I dare to tell her?  
And by me she was quite smitten  
But we'd literally just written  
about how inappropriate  
It might be to ask people on a date

more alarmingly, to me,  
she was a singer you see.  
in a lesbian feminist band  
Now you understand  
my hesitation.

And she knew I was a Christian  
And a Christian a minister at that  
not yet legally divorced.

But of course  
Sometimes you have to grow up, and take a chance  
So I asked my friend to ask her friend if she could ask  
Her if she could tell her friend to tell my friend whether she'd like to dance.  
She wouldn't.  
And now you've seen me try you know why  
But she did want "know me".  
So we got together,  
and a few months later I finally let her

Then we started on a baby  
Who we took to our wedding-  
Which to some extent was our way of getting  
Some old white church guys off our back.  
You see they were emphatic  
that our love, no matter how ecstatic  
must be chaste.

My minister was right  
When he said "hide that light"  
Of your love under a bushel, keep it secret, keep it safe.  
This may be blessed by the Divine,  
But even if it's a pearl there are plenty of swine.

But even straight white blokes like me  
Begin to feel ashamed  
If they accept that their love is one which dare not speak its name.

So I decided to witness, not beg for forgiveness.  
Which sounds brave now, but  
I would have quit a dozen times in the years that followed  
But for every Christian who confronted me with my disgrace  
There was another who found us a beacon of grace.  
Who thought "If he's still a minister, maybe I still fit"

And all the while their secret stories  
Of celebration, hidden 'neath shame and alienation  
Came quietly, circuitously, into our conversation  
All these tiny stories, feeling so alone  
Because nobody dares to tell them in church  
For fear of that first stone.

Why am I telling you this? It's not the free catharsis  
I'm hoping a few of you, after you get up off your arses  
And travel home will share your story of celebration  
Make Australia a more open minded nation.  
There's whatiwishisaidinchurch  
(you can Google that - that's mine)  
Or if you're not inclined to tangle with the divine  
There are plenty of other options on line.  
Or tell someone face to face  
Tell your story not as disgrace, but as grace.  
Go on, take a chance

Tell someone about that time you asked the wrong person, at the wrong time, in the  
wrong place, to dance