



**Our
search
stops
here!**

“If God didn’t exist then it would be necessary to invent him”.

Writing some 250 years ago, Voltaire, the French philosopher was discussing belief in God in the context of the Enlightenment and the whole issue of reason.

Well, I am not going to get into a debate about God on Christmas morning! But, it’s important to ask ourselves – on this Christmas day - if God didn’t exist, would it still be necessary to invent him? In other words, can Christmas be celebrated without God? Can we exist as people and can we live in community without any notion of, or relationship, with God?

It seems not. The writer, David Tacey, says Australians are hungrier than ever for what he refers to as the “transcendent”. In other words, it seems as though people are searching for an experience that takes them beyond themselves. They are actually longing for an experience that takes them beyond the material reality around them.

Indeed, in one of Australia’s largest bookshops, readings in mystical literature are the most popular these days after cookbooks and travel guides. And maybe this seems to be a contradiction because politics and religion are often said to be out of bounds in the Australian narrative. But again, is that true?

In his recently published book, Cards, Carols and Clause, Rex Hunt exams the celebration of Christmas here in Australia. He looks at the phenomenon of “Carols by Candlelight”. He looks at all the festive activities that take place and he discusses the practice of exchanging Christmas cards, of gift-giving, Christmas dinners and even Santa Clause.

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And Rex Hunt suggests Christmas is a special time. He concludes that Christmas is a significant time for most as ordinary Australians get together, as they celebrate and as they engage with a great degree of enthusiasm, awe and wonder with something that is much bigger than themselves.

Viktor Frankel is a writer who endured two Nazi concentration camps during World War Two. Such a horrific experience went on to shape his life and Frankel goes on to say *“the major motivation of life is to search for meaning, not for self”*. Frankel concludes that a life beyond oneself, a life that focuses beyond one’s own understanding and a life that extends beyond one’s own life experience is a life that is well lived.

And I believe Frankel is correct. For you see, all around the world this quest for meaning goes on. People are longing to embrace a purpose that is bigger than themselves – they are yearning for something truly worthwhile to live for.

And this comment comes to us amidst an avalanche of expressions in our community that point to the “self” – there is the “i Phone” and the “i Pad”. There is “mybus” and “mytrain” - and these days we don’t go the Motor Registry Office – we go to “myRTA”. And then there is, of course, the alluring “selfie” that is all the rage.

Friends, despite this obsession with the “self” these days, there is a longing for purpose, there is a search for meaning, there is a yearning to go beyond ourselves - to a deeper, enriching reality. And this longing, this search, this yearning takes an important direction as we gather in this church and as we cast our eyes on the baby who is born in Bethlehem.

And the place where our eyes are fixed is on a manger in a stable, out the back of an inn. The scene is a pretty ordinary one as common shepherds gather and as the mother, Mary, suckles her baby son. Beside her is Joseph surrounding Mary and the babe with generous love and support.

For today is Christmas Day – and on this day we recognise, indeed we affirm that our quest for meaning, our longing for that which is beyond ourselves – is bound up in the adoration of that wondrous, new-born child whose name is Jesus.

We heard the story of Jesus’ birth from the Bible this morning. It’s a story that takes place in a lowly animal shelter in the inauspicious village of Bethlehem.

But the narrative is interspersed with what can only be described as some pretty amazing stuff. There are bright lights and there are choirs of angels who praise God as the announcement is made that this lowly child is the long awaited Messiah. This new born babe is the one promised by God to deliver God’s people and herald a new order of justice and peace.

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And all this glitter and loud hailing is actually not a distraction because it's there to say something vitally important. What it says is this - our search for meaning, our yearning for purpose, our quest for something beyond ourselves takes us to a pretty ordinary stable out the back of a Bethlehem inn.

And it is here that the wonder, the majesty, the mercy and the grace of God intersects human experience to announce that our quest, our search, our longing has ended. It ends as God intersects, as God intervenes in the ordinary, in the common things of this world - to offer us a way forward.

So, just as the angelic choir bursts forth over the barren, wintry fields of Bethlehem, so God breaks into our common lives and experiences with the Good News that Jesus is born, that Jesus has come and that Jesus is here for each one of us

Friends, on this Christmas Day, in your longing for purpose, in your search for meaning, in your yearning to go beyond yourselves to encounter a reality and a direction much bigger than who you are, spend some time here at the manger. Cast your eyes on Bethlehem and consider the Christ child who is born for you today.

For at Christmas God breaks into our lives. God breaks into our experiences with the message that there is a better way!

There is a better way - where we are not alone and where do not have to rely simply on ourselves.

There is a better way - where there is a higher more authentic truth that does not depend on the cynicism, the rhetoric and the spin-doctoring that goes on so much in our nation today.

There is a better way - where justice and peace become a reality and where we do not have to put others down or exploit them as means of protecting our own way of life.

There is a better way – where others are not overlooked, ignored or marginalised as a way of dealing with our own fears and insecurities.

There is a better way – where life flourishes and where life does not depend – where life is not defined - by how much we earn, on where our children go to school or on what suburb we live in.

For as you gather around the Christmas tree this morning to share gifts or as you prepare for that sumptuous Christmas dinner, remember - all our hopes, all our dreams, all our desires, indeed all that we yearn for, is focussed on that baby child whose birth we celebrate today.

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And take note. You don't have to be perfect, you don't have to be a saint, you don't have to have done all the right things to participate in this. You don't need money, you don't need power, you don't need status or prestige to be here. You don't have to be sound in body, mind or reputation to be part of it.

At Christmas all our hopes and all our dreams are fulfilled as this awesome God comes to us in the every-day ordinariness of who we are and what we experience.

For our search stops right here. On this Christmas morn, Christ the Lord is born among us. Christ the Lord is born for us!

Amen.



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