



THE HOME OF MY HEART: A CHRISTMAS REFLECTION

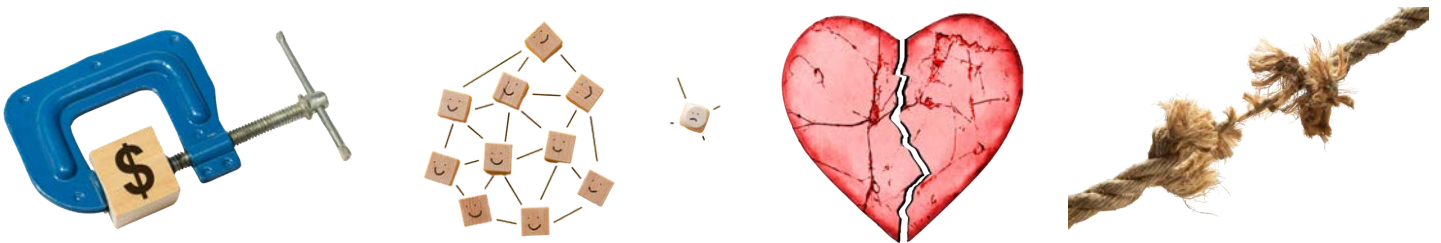
A REFLECTION BY CLARE JOHNSON



IT'S THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR

As the strains of the cheerful, idealistic Christmas song echo around me, my heart questions the reality of its' message - is it really the most wonderful time of the year? Christmas is a special and pivotal time. As Christians, it's when we celebrate the sacredness of life, personal connections, and the incarnation of God in the birth of Jesus. It's when we recognise that God becomes human and, by doing so, becomes accessible, relatable, and able to reach our hearts in a relational and transformative way. Yet, the lived experience of Christmas time can sometimes take us away from that singular truth - a loving God living with us. Instead, the brokenness of the world and ourselves can intrude through financial difficulties, loneliness, conflict, illness, strained relationships, grief, and more. We can be overwhelmed and stressed with expectations, pressures, and busyness. We lose the beautiful spirit of Christmas - the 'home of our hearts' that is love and always with us.

Christmas is a time when people gather together to celebrate (whether it's the birth of Jesus or simply the year's end), exchange gifts, prepare festive meals, and decorate living spaces. The expectation of giving, generosity, and travel often comes with a financial burden. If we're not careful, festivities can turn from showing love, gratitude, and respect into striving for perfection, maintaining appearances, and not wanting to disappoint others. At a time when Australians are already experiencing financial stress, with "the cost of living pressure experienced by Australian households sit[ting] in the extreme range at 79%" ([Money Magazine](#)), Christmas celebrations can place additional pressure on people. The choice between overcommitting financially, relying on charitable organisations for assistance, or limiting/cancelling celebrations is the cause of unwanted financial and emotional stress, which can manifest in many ways (e.g., increased levels of family violence, abuse of retail staff, and spikes in suicides and homelessness) ([UNSW](#), [ABC News](#), [Catholic Care](#)). Christmas, suddenly, isn't such a wonderful time of the year!



Christmas also happens in the circumstances of our everyday lives. Maybe we or someone we love is ill. Maybe someone in our life has died, and we are experiencing grief and the pain of them being missing from celebrations. Maybe we are new parents struggling with sleep deprivation and the responsibility of looking after an infant. Maybe we have strained relationships with people we will gather with or have had a relationship breakdown. Maybe we have been facing discrimination, trauma, and injustice, and the contrast to Christmas cheer is jarring. Maybe we have been isolated and lonely, even in the company of others. Maybe we have no one to spend time with or have travelled somewhere far from our loved ones. Maybe we have been facing mental illness or social anxiety and aren't sure how to navigate the festivities. Maybe we have been worried about people judging our life choices or the inherent truth about ourselves. Whatever the situation is, Christmas is happening within the diverse reality of human life. So how do we find the presence of the loving God within our hearts, and how do we take that loving heart of God into our interactions with others at Christmas?



FURTHER REFLECTION AND LEARNING

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

In 2023, the World Health Organisation (WHO) identified social isolation and loneliness as a global public health concern, with the young and the elderly being particularly susceptible.

Read more:

- [Social Isolation and Loneliness](#), WHO
- [Social Isolation and Loneliness](#), Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHS)
- [WHO launches commission to foster social cohesion and address loneliness as a pressing health threat](#), United Nations
- [A resource for parents and teachers about loneliness and young people](#), Unicef Australia



WE ARE ONE, BUT WE ARE DIVERSE

Creator God, in your goodness and creativity you designed diversity and vibrancy of life. Indeed, it is an expression of your love for your Creation and Created beings that individuality and uniqueness can work harmoniously together in an interconnected web of life and community.

We acknowledge sometimes we turn difference and diversity into a source of alienation, injustice, oppression, and wounding. Empower us to recognise and celebrate the differences we find in one another and not to view these differences as threats to ourselves. Enable us to be the architects of understanding, respect, and love. Help us learn to listen more deeply, connect with those with different perspectives, backgrounds, customs, and languages, and remember that each of us has a different way of reacting to any situation. Remind us that each of us is created by love, to love, and for love; that each of us is willed, created in God's image, and necessary.

Loving God, we pray that you give us new strength to break down barriers, open hearts, and build places of belonging and welcome. To create a community for all to share their gifts. To help us see your heart in all people.

God, you are the one from whom, on different paths, all of us have come; and to whom, on different paths, all of us are going. Strengthen in our hearts what unites us. Build bridges across all that divides us. United make us rejoice in our diversity, and as one, let us 'be on Earth the Heart of God'.

Adapted from [Luc.edu](#) and [Xavier.edu](#).

LOVE CAME DOWN

The lyrics from a different song echo this time: "Love came down" (Kari Jobe). Indeed, as we reflect on two Scriptural Christmas stories (Luke 2:1-7 and Matthew 2:13-18), we see how God (love incarnate) came down into the complexity of human lives and lived as and with us. Theological writer Ormond Rush states, "Only from dwelling within the heart of God do we get a perspective on things around us that is more likely to be from God's perspective."

LUKE 2:1-7 (NRSV)

“

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

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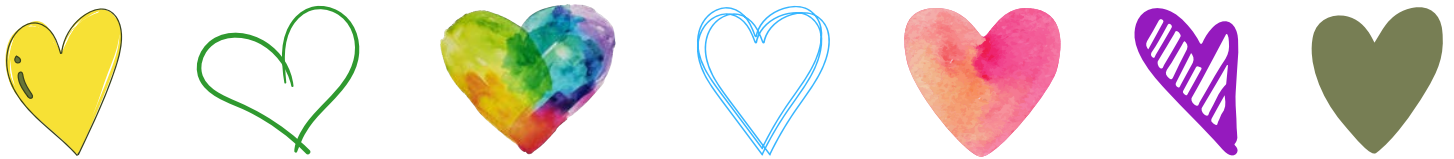
MATTHEW 2: 13-18 (NRSV)

“

... an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

”

The circumstances of the Christmas story outlined in these Gospel readings are far from ideal! We have a couple travelling together whilst still figuring out the dynamics of their relationship and their miraculous and unexpected pregnancy. We have an inconvenient travel schedule (ask any pregnant woman how they would feel about a rough journey at nearly full term!). We have a desperate housing situation with tired and worried parents and a baby ready to be delivered. We have a woman giving birth in uncomfortable surroundings and away from family, community, and any medical or emotional support. We have a fear of persecution and death from a tyrannical leader simply because of who they were. We have a frantic journey through the night into an unknown country. We have a horrific massacre of innocent lives. If we only look at the circumstances, it's not a 'wonderful' story at all!



Thankfully, in the Christmas story, there is also awe (a feeling of reverential respect mixed with fear or wonder), love in many forms, and the presence of God! There is awe in the successful birth, the incarnate God, the presence of angels, and the dreaming of prophetic warnings. There is love in the choices that the protagonists make, often despite the cost - God's choice to become love incarnate and have Mary and Joseph as parents; Mary's choice to be the loving mother of Jesus and the wife of Joseph; and Joseph's choice to love, accept, and treasure Mary and Jesus. There is love in choosing a different path than expected to protect someone. There is love in the inconsolable grief of the families mourning injustice and lost children. There is love in God's awesome presence in the infant Jesus - Anyone who has held a child has likely been awestruck by the tiny, vulnerable, and trusting presence! The story of Jesus' birth fulfils prophecy and yet defies expectation because, at its core, decisions to love are made in the chaotic messiness of human experience.



Love is a home in our hearts built on presence and connection. It's found in the waiting and anticipation, the struggle and living, and the giving and receiving of self. It starts with God within us from the moment of our creation. It builds deep connections to others (families, friends, and communities) in large and small ways. St Thomas Aquinas eloquently stated that to love is to "*consistently will and choose the good of the other*" ([Word On Fire](#)), and St Clare of Assisi asserted that "*we become what we love and who we love shapes what we become*" ([Medium](#)). The Christmas story of the Gospel is a message of love triumphing despite life's challenges and of a loving God being present in it all, at home with us.

FURTHER REFLECTION AND LEARNING

LECTIO DIVINA REFLECTION QUESTIONS (SCRIPTURAL READING, MEDITATION, AND PRAYER)

Use the biblical Christmas stories (Luke 2:1-7 and Matthew 2:13-18) for Lectio Divina.

- What words or phrases catch your attention?
- How do life's discomforts and challenges draw you towards God in the stories?
- Where does love call you to reflect, respond, or change this Christmas?



It's the unwed woman
who carries God.



It's the pagans from the East
who recognise God.

It's the workers in the field
who hear from God.

It's the marginalised neighbourhood
who welcomes God.

God chooses the lowly and broken
to rise.

Christmas is here!
Let's remember what it's all about.



YOU ARE OUR HOME



Now, the evocative words of James Maher MSC's beautiful song begin to echo.

"You are our home. You are our happiness. You are our comfort and our hope. You are our blessedness. You are the place we come from. You are our destiny. In You, our hearts find lasting peace. You are our home. You are our spirit's rest. You run to us with open arms and constant tenderness. You lay your life aside in love. You offer everything. In You, our lives are made complete. You are our home. You're the ground on which we stand. You make us strong. It's the space within your walls that lets us breathe. In your rooms, we find our rest. In your love, we are alive. At your table, we are nourished, all our hunger satisfied. You made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless 'til they rest in you." ([MSC Music](#))

The concept of home stirs a mystical yearning within our souls. Home is a foreshadowing glimpse of heaven that promises a place where we are loved and nurtured, safe and protected, and free and comfortable. It's a sacred sanctuary where "we can truly be ourselves" and connect with God, others and the world around us ([Habitat For Humanity](#)). So how do we build a home in our hearts, particularly at Christmas?

Christmas is an opportunity to build a relationship with God. It's embracing the season of advent as a time to reflect on the joy of the Gospels, the incarnation and reign of God in our past, present, and future. It's carving out quiet moments to pause and meditate on God's presence and messages to us in Scripture, Creation, our hearts and lives. It's keeping open our minds and hearts to praying even in the most chaotic moments: "Thank you, God, for laundry as it means I have clothes to wear", "How stunning and delicate is that flower! God, you are an artist bringing beauty into my life. I praise you!", "I'm tired, God! Help me to find rest", or "I was frustrated, and I needed you. Where were you? Did I miss you?". It's receiving the Christmas gift of God.

Christmas is a time to connect with yourself in body, mind, and heart. It's practising self-care in whatever form works for you, such as taking a walk, gardening, getting a massage, reading, having a bath, going rock climbing, or taking a trip away. It's seeking help if you need it, as sometimes we need the support of others to care for ourselves. It's gifting ourselves with the same dignity, respect, and loving attention we give others.

Christmas is a moment to bond with others. It's including people in your Christmas celebrations who could be isolated or struggling. It's creating community by holding a gift donation and regifting day, a Christmas hamper preparation and delivery day, a Christmas festival fundraiser, or hosting a parish or community group Christmas lunch. It's having welcoming and safe spaces for people and holding accessible and inclusive masses and liturgies (e.g., low sensory conditions, accessible venues, inclusive language, personal invitations, hospitality). It's offering the gift of presence, acceptance, and love.

This picture of Christmas is the promised wonderful time of year! A Christmas where the home of my heart is centred on love and God. Where do you find the home of your heart?

FURTHER REFLECTION AND LEARNING

SUPPORTS

Sometimes we need to seek support from the community around us. Some of the options are:

- [13Yarn](#) (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) (13 92 76)
- [1800Respect](#) (Family and Sexual Violence) (1800 737 732)
- [Beyond Blue](#) (1300 224 636)
- [Black Dog Institute](#)
- [Catholic Social Services Australia](#)
- [Kid's Helpline](#) (1800 551 800)
- [Lifeline](#) (13 11 14)
- [MensLine Australia](#) (1300 789 978)
- [Relationships Australia](#) (1300 364 277)
- [QLife](#) (LGBTIQ+) (1800 184 527)
- [Vinnies](#)
- Your local parish or community group

Loving God, help us remember the birth of Jesus, that we may share in the song of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, and worship of the wise men.

Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world.
Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting.

May the Christmas morning make us happy to be your children, and
Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts,
forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake.

Robert Louis Stevenson

