



MODERATOR'S ADVENT MESSAGE 2025

The madness of the commercial-driven Christmas season appeared overnight a few weeks ago. The message with a unified voice: Spend! Spend! Spend! Spend! A good Christmas depends on what you purchase to make others and yourself happy... and don't worry about the debt and hardship that will follow. And, in that build-up to Christmas, is the Advent Season marking the beginning of the liturgical year - if you are into that sort of thing. If not, Advent and Christmas are still the beginning of the Christian story.

Through Advent, we are focused on a pathway of powerful promises and, eventually, scenes of supernatural happenings in Matthew chapters 1 & 2. Those passages read like fairy tales to many, but in fact convey the mystery of God in the advent of Jesus. In a world of wars and rumours of wars, how about the first reading for the first Sunday in Advent, from Isaiah 2:4: *"The LORD will mediate between nations and will settle international disputes. They will hammer their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war anymore"*. When I contemplate that verse, there is hope and relief that, for example, history is in the Lord's domain and in the end, institutions like the United Nations are not eternal. International peace will be a miracle of God, not the feeble attempts of human counsel.

The last reading on the fourth Sunday in Advent is Matthew 1:18-25. The virgin birth, the angel of the Lord appearing in a dream, the choirs of angels, and that star that pinpoints the place of Jesus' birth for the Eastern visitors. For me, that passage of Scripture displays the mystery of God. A mystery that is still discoverable in our day, as God moves in mysterious ways through Christ in our midst. I am talking about people discovering a faith relationship with Jesus, coming in from a place way out from a fellowship of believers, miracles, spiritual and physical, in 2025 faith and peace in tragedy and grief. The faith of Mary and Joseph, the surprised awe of the shepherds, and the searching and discovery of the Eastern visitors. The mystery of God cannot be shackled by the likes of Herod's self-interest and unbelief, or noisy scoffers inside or outside the church.

So how does the Advent narrative cross over into a secular, largely non-religious society that is rediscovering spirituality? A story before offering an answer. I am a member of one of the Rotary Clubs in Invercargill. The club plays a significant role in organising the City Christmas Parade, which winds its way through the CBD on the last weekend of November, attracting thousands of people who line the streets and end up at Queens Park for an afternoon of festivities.



I have been a float vehicle driver for close to 15 years. I have towed the Santa Claus float a few times, reminding myself it was representing St Nicholas. I held up the parade one year because the Santa float trailer got a flat tyre, thankfully outside a tyre shop. "God is good all the time - all the time God is good!" About 10 years ago, there was no visible Christian presence in the parade. So, our church decided to sponsor a float depicting the manger scene. It was very plain. We used mannequins for the characters and stuffed animals, and a couple of bales of hay. We were placed about 25 in the line of about 30 floats. We were placed behind a float for a large chain store that sells building materials. They had a deafening sound system that broadcast the "Bob the Builder" theme throughout the journey. It drove me nuts!

The following year, we were separated from Bob the Builder and placed well within earshot of the crowds' comments. I could not believe the number of anti-Christian slurs and comments spoken our way about our faith and the meaning of Christmas. One was that God was as dead as our mannequin characters. So, a bit of a rethink on our visible presence in a secular setting. The following year, we had Joseph and Mary as live human beings, with a few real human children, still with the baby doll Jesus and the stuffed animals. From about four years ago, we still have a plain-looking manger scene, a bit of Christmas music, a human Joseph and Mary in costume, as long as they have had a baby born during the year to represent baby Jesus, and as many angels, shepherds, and children dressed up as animals as we are allowed to fit on the big trailer we use.

Two years ago, our float was placed at the front of the parade, right behind the Pipe Band and Mayoral car, because, according to my secular friends who organise the parade, our presence sets the scene and reason for the season. I drove the float at the front the first year and enjoyed waving at Bob the Builder as we passed by on the return journey.

We live in a secular post-Christian age. What many of us are experiencing is that there has been a ground shift in our cultural settings from those who, before, wouldn't give Christianity a thought beyond "that is quaint" or "that's irrelevant", sometimes with a cuss and a swear. What I have described is not a revival of faith as such but drawing people's thoughts to the story of Jesus' birth. Our float is a tiny part of that. We need to be out in the secular world being seen. The story has power in it through the Holy Spirit's ability to open people's minds and hearts. Never underestimate that power.

The liturgical Season of Advent is a time of slow-down to prepare for Christmas, along a path marked by Old and New Testament passages. How will you tell this story, or will you avoid it or try to remove the mystery? One of the readings for the fourth Sunday of Advent is Isaiah 7:10-16. The Lord asks King Ahaz to ask him to do something as difficult as he can think of, even an impossible thing. Ahaz refuses because he would not test the Lord like that. So, the Lord chooses the difficult, impossible thing. Verse 14: *"All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us')"*.

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