

## **“A Shy Hope in the Heart” - Rev’d Hans Christiansen - Christmas 2008**

**Readings: Isa 9. 2-7, Ps 96, Titus 2. 11-14**

What a beautiful and holy night. I love this Christmas night. When everything becomes quiet, all the rush of the Christmas preparation is over, and we come together in the stillness of the night to light candles and celebrate the birth of Christ. It seems to me like God’s spirit is very near in the depth of the night. Perhaps it is because the light of the spirit shines brighter in the darkness?

It does seem like the spirit of God awakens in people not only at night but when times are darkest. It was, as Isaiah had foretold, in the darkest of time the Christ would be revealed. Remember as we heard before: *“the people who walked in the darkness have seen a great light”*.

Times are growing more insecure and somewhat darker. We face a massive financial and ecological and humanitarian crisis and many of us are anxious. Where do we find meaning in it all? Do we, as the government propose, put our trust in the materialistic system and try to spend ourselves out of the crisis by consuming more? Or do we begin to search for spirituality and faith to give us direction on how to live with these uncertain times?

Research tells us that Australians are searching for spirituality more than ever before. People are hungry to explore ways of the spirit. This search for deeper values of life will, I suggest, only increase over the next year, as the real consequences of the financial crisis will be felt harder for the average Australian.

The spirituality of Christ is well sought after in our Australian context and Christmas and Easter services across the country are fortunately growing in numbers.

Australian Sociologist and Priest Gary Bouma recently published a book about spirituality and religion in Australia called *“Australian Soul”*. In his book, Bouma describes Australians as very spiritual people but very shy about speaking about it. He describes the nature of Australian Spirituality as *“A shy hope in the heart”*. *“There is”,* Bouma writes, *“a profound shyness – yet a deeply grounded hope – held tenderly in the heart of Australia”*.

If Australian spirituality generally can be described as *‘a shy hope in the heart’*, then I believe Australians, have adopted well the message of the Christ-child born in a manger. For there is something profoundly shy and humble, yet deeply hopeful about the Christ being born in a manger. Even though we have built huge churches and created massive institutions in his name, there is really nothing grandiose or proud about the birth and way of Jesus. His way from cradle to cross is a way of humbleness and peace, *“a shy hope in the heart”*.

If you think of the story we celebrate tonight; it all took place outside a little humble village on the edge of an empire. The shepherds and wise men who came to pay Christ homage probably were a little surprised how humble it all was. They must have asked themselves: Is this really the wonderful counsellor and Prince of Peace who has

come to unite humanity and God? Is he really the one who is to reveal the power of God?

The power of God revealed in Christmas is the power of a baby, nothing more, nothing less; innocence, gentleness, helplessness, love, a vulnerability that can soften hearts, invite in, have us hush our voices, teach us patience, and call forth what's best in us.

The Christ light in these times are not to be found in muscle power, spending more or spending hardly anything on the environment. To put our hope on that is to dance around the golden calf and worship materialism.

The real way of change, according to Christian spirituality, is the way of heart. It's the way of love and kindness, of childlike-innocence and wonder. When we embody these Christ-like qualities we call forth love and care in others and like a ripple effect love and healing travel like our Christmas story has travelled from Bethlehem to the ends of the earth.

More than 600 years ago, the Christian mystic and theologian, Meister Eckhart asked: *'What good is it to me if the Son of God was born to Mary 1400 years ago but is not born in my person and in my culture and in my time?'*

Eckhart's question is somewhat echoed in a Jewish tradition that says every generation holds within it the potential for a Messiah, and every baby born may be the promised one.

Everyone holds the potential to embody the Christ-love into this world. As times perhaps get darker we need to nurture the Christ-child within the shyness of our own hearts, so that love through us can continue to be born into the world.

As we gather around the crib tonight, let us together pray with the hymn that Christ, the vulnerable child, may be born in us and all people tonight in a new way and that his way of simplicity, forgiveness and love may become our way so that through us God's light may radiate into the world.

**Come Lord Jesus, be re-born in us tonight.  
The Lord be with you.**

Hans Christiansen