

## Christmas Eve

Yesterday morning I looked across from the Lobethal Cemetery to the Bushland Park that I had visited a number of times to enjoy the birds there. The bushfire had reduced it to a forest of charred tree trunks. Below the cemetery was one of the many vineyards that had been burnt in the fire. But only a few of the trees in the cemetery had been burnt. And there were still birds there. On the way to Lobethal I passed a number of homes that had been destroyed. But what amazed me was the number of homes that had not been touched by the fire.

The pain of the loss of homes, livestock and property cannot be underestimated. The extent of the fire and the damage it caused is a great tragedy. Yet in the story of every tragedy there is always hope. Already welfare agencies have been overwhelmed by the donations that people have given to support the victims of the fires. The story of Christ's birth has so many elements in it that are tragic and painful. Joseph and Mary were forced to leave home and go to Bethlehem so that a foreign power could tax them. They could not find a comfortable room in which to give birth to their son. They had to stay with the animals and use a feed bin as a cradle. They had no family to support them when they were so far from home. It was the poorest of the poor who were told of

the birth of Jesus, and those shepherds were the only ones who came to welcome the new born king.

But despite all of that the birth of Jesus brought hope to a suffering people. The news of Christ's birth was being trumpeted by the angels in heaven. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to all who enjoy his favour." This child who was born in a lowly stable had come to raise up all who were downtrodden by sin and oppression. This child who was born on one of the darkest nights of the year had come to bring light to the world. This child who was born a long way from home and would soon have to take refuge in Egypt, had come to rescue the homeless.

The celebration of Christmas is not just about remembering what happened in the past. Christmas makes Jesus present to us now. Jesus comes again to everyone who is open to his coming. Jesus comes especially to those who are suffering in any way. We often like to hide our suffering from one another, but we need not hide it from the one who bore more suffering than any of us can bear.

Jesus had come to transform our suffering and loss into joy. Not the joy that might come briefly from the good food and fine wine that we might share around the Christmas table, but the deep-down joy that comes from

knowing that we are loved. Christ came into our world to make known the love our God has for us. It is the love of a parent who loves us no matter what. Christ loads us up with that love so that we can carry it to others.

Jesus comes to stand with us wherever we are, even on the hill of a cemetery. He looks with us at the brokenness and pain that we can see. He comes to heal that pain and restore that brokenness. He stands with us as we look at ourselves and sees with us what needs healing within us. He offers us the love that renews us. This is his gift to us this Christmas.

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