

# On elf pilots and a dianella Christ

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 15 December 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Advent 3C

**Luke 3: 7-18; Contemporary Reading from *Reflections on Hope* by Jan Richardson**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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Do you remember the twelve days of Christmas? No, I don't mean the song. I mean the time when the festival of Christmas began around Christmas Eve and ran through to the eve of Epiphany, otherwise known as twelfth night. That is where the song comes from of course, alongside the tradition, now long gone in many places that used to practice this, of taking Christmas decorations down before January 6. Today, in contemporary Australia, the Christmas season seems to start at the beginning of November and is essentially declared over before the feast of St Stephen, aka Boxing Day.

This year this has been vividly illustrated by the *Wondrous World of Christmas*,<sup>i</sup> which opened near us on the corner of York and Market Streets on 8 November and continues until Christmas Eve. Complete with helpful elf pilots – mainly friendly students and backpackers needing a job – it is billed as '*an epic animated walk-through immersive experience and journey to the North Pole*', with '*stunning*' VFX and CGI, and tickets from \$25 but free to under 3s, all coming with a free Santa letter pack and complimentary North Pole digital family photo.

No, sadly, especially for our treasurer, I am not getting a commission! What it does give me however are three questions. Firstly, in that context, and many other such lively things, what are our churches doing in marking the ecclesiastical season of Advent? Secondly, how, in doing so, are we engaging with the contexts in which we live? And, thirdly, and not least, what has the message of John the Baptist we hear today (in Luke 3.7-18) to say to our world?

Let me begin by saying that I am certainly not encouraging us to add to those somewhat tired old Christian practices of bemoaning the perceived materialism, secularism, and paganism, of modern Western Christmases. At this time, we are undoubtedly all caught up in the extraordinary whirl of late capitalist consumerism, which has many questionable aspects. However, unless we really want to go back to the misplaced repressiveness of some of our Puritan forebears, we do much better to live through this current season with a lightness of spirit. That doesn't mean we all have to dress up in elf suits. However, we do not have to copy John the Baptist literally, making ourselves seriously ascetic and calling out crowds as '*broods of vipers*' and threatening '*coming wrath*'. Indeed, in the face of the many agonies and anxieties among and around us today, perhaps a lightness of spirit is one of the loveliest gifts of hope and peace that Christians might nurture and offer.

In that spirit though, what *is* the purpose of Advent? And what shape might it fruitfully take today? For there are at least two major challenges for contemporary Christians, related on the one hand to modernity and post-modernity, and on the other hand to our geography. Not least because of the very different hemisphere and continent in which they were formed, we might ask whether 'traditional' forms of marking Advent can really be truly meaningful down under. Do we risk serving up ecclesial versions of cultures, which, like the *Wondrous World of Christmas*, come from very different contexts to our own actual realities? Advent might then be another more or less enjoyable contribution to Australian multi-culturalism, but does it take us deeper into the heart of our lives here?

In terms of changing times, the origins of Advent not only lie way back in our ecumenical Christian Tradition, at least as far back as the fifth century CE. Advent was for centuries also tied up with penitence and fasting, in order that, like the practices of Lent before Easter, the twelve days of Christmas might indeed be fully festive, special, and transformative. The Advent mood was also somewhat sombre, reflected in liturgical colours, which have mainly been violet or purple, but also at times black, and, in some denominations, blue, with the colour of rose reserved to bring a note of joy, for the Virgin Mary, on the third Sunday of Advent.

Furthermore, some of us who are older, like me, may remember that we were brought up in the days when Advent was an invitation to reflect upon what Christian Tradition calls '*the four last things*': namely Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell. To be honest, they are important themes which do need digesting at some time in our lives. However, more recently, Churches have deliberately shifted away from penitence, sombreness, and ultimate things, towards focusing on values such as hope, peace, joy, and love – albeit with some confusion at times about which value goes where, especially in relation to the Virgin Mary.

Yet what do we then do about the harder aspects of what Advent sought to wrestle with in the past, and not least the challenges of John the Baptist and the wider prophetic tradition? And how does this sit with the need to locate faith in the context of Country as actually experienced here and understood by its First Peoples?

For, secondly, if we are to re-evaluate our Advent traditions, and re-imagine them in new forms, then the season through which we now travel invites us, like John the Baptist and the prophets, to fresh engagement with our contexts. In reflecting upon this, I am also struck by the oddities of recent Australian celebrations of the change of seasons at what Westerners in the northern hemisphere have called Halloween. At a time when the sun and light are growing ever stronger, many Australians seem to plunge back into reflection on light in darkness, which indeed resonates well in other geographies but less so here.

Similarly, many of our Advent and Christmas spiritual symbols sit a little askance with the realities of our geography and climate. Of course, they still ring true in many ways. For we do not need the cold and distinctive features of the world's north, to know the value of God as light in our human struggles, as new birth in the face of winter and death, and as transforming energy for troubles in our homes and the hearths of our souls. However, how, here, might we more fully embody the meaning of Advent hope and of Christmas divine spirit made flesh?

Advent, like the other liturgical and lectionary seasons of the Church, is part of the profound human need to give meaning and purpose to the transformations of time and place. It is therefore not fixed, but open for us to reshape afresh, with stories, songs, and spiritual themes of our own, in dialogue with the wisdom and rhythms of this place and the Spirit of this Country. For we do well to listen, in this season, not only to what is good in our Advent traditions brought from afar. But, just as the witness of John the Baptist came out of his deep connecting with the natural world of his own context, we also do well to listen, perhaps ultimately more importantly, to the deep textures of hope, peace, joy, and love woven in the climatic patterns, celestial events, and ecological phenomena in which we live and move.

Instead of primarily offering each other extra light and heat, we might therefore particularly seek to offer one another shade and shelter, rest, cooling and balm. We might reflect more deeply on what the Dharug social enterprise Murru Mittagar names as Gadalung Marool (the Hot and Dry Season) now upon us, and the meaning for us and other created beings of clear skies, with occasional storms, parched and changing earth, and the sense of stillness enveloping the landscapes. <sup>ii</sup>

This season, Gadalung Marool, Aboriginal peoples of Sydney have long known, and practiced, is a time for storytelling, ceremony and spiritual renewal; in that sense, a period which resonates in a number of ways with ancient Christian Traditional patterns of Advent, but also in quite different ways. For, as the Dharug have also named, this is a season of Bayin Gura, of cool getting warmer. <sup>iii</sup>

This is a time for preparation indeed, but not so much in traditional Advent terms, never mind the *Wondrous World of Christmas*, but as a time of drying and weaving – literally, as well as metaphorically, drying the leaves of the dianella plant (the native flax lily) which blooms at this time and weaving them into string, nets, baskets and traps. This is a time too for the dianella berries, which also make the purple colour dye and which may be enjoyed fresh or cooked into sweet and savoury dishes, and the dianella plant root which may be roasted for eating – other beautiful Advent and Christmas resonances, but more connecting with, and enriching of, Country.

How then will we then, better listen to the Spirit in Country here by story-telling, ceremony, and spiritual renewal as we approach our celebration of Christ's birth? Perhaps the heart of the matter comes in another, arguably the central, feature, of First Nations' spirituality, which resonates so strongly with that of John the Baptist and the great prophets: namely, relationship. For thirdly, if we are to renew our Advent spiritual practices, and engage more deeply with our own contexts, then it has to come through a deepening of relationships, and a greater sharing of fruits of love and justice. Through this, in divinely shaped relationship, we find our true hope and peace.

For, if we might understandably balk a little at John the Baptist's opening salvo of words toward the crowds, we need, nonetheless, to receive it as a call to them to enter into deeper relationship, with the people and times in which they were living. After all, unlike the *Wondrous World of Christmas*, John the Baptist was not selling tickets at \$25 each, but, in God's free grace, he was also inviting people into a different space and experience. Indeed, if you permit me the pun, through baptism in the river Jordan, rather than VFX and CGI, he was also, literally as well as metaphorically, inviting people into an immersive experience.

Crucially, this was an experience of more just and loving relationships with those around them. Thus, John the Baptist still offers us very practical advice for our Advent season. If you have two coats – or we might add any other extra possessions – give them to those who have none.

If you have food in abundance, share it with those who have none.

If you have power, of any kind, over others – like the soldiers who ask him for advice – John the Baptist asks us to treat others with dignity, not exploiting others, not threatening others or sharing false accusations, and being content with what we need, not feeding our greed.

All of that is also pretty good Aboriginal wisdom we need to hear, and it is pretty good advice for whatever we enjoy and however we travel through this season.

A final thought: are we looking forward to the fullness of the Christ-time, in the way John the Baptist did? For my taste, I am not sure I always dwell as happily as the Baptist, and Luke, on the picture of Christ with a winnowing fork, gathering up wheat, and burning up chaff with an unquenchable fire. But I know what the Baptist, and Luke, is trying to say: that Advent, the Coming, of Christ, is not so much about wonderful ‘special’ experiences, as about casting away what we don’t need, sharing food, and fruitfulness, and nurturing deeper relationship with others and the whole Creation of which we are a part.

Maybe we might want to re-imagine that picture a little: for example, perhaps seeing Christ in generations after generations of the Dharug – gathering plants like the dianella: weaving, cooking, and offering us all shade and lightness of being.

In the hope, peace, and joy of embodied love, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> [Wondrous World of Christmas — An immersive animated adventure to the North Pole](#)

<sup>ii</sup> [An Understanding of Aboriginal Seasons in Sydney - Muru Mittigar](#)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.westernsydneyparklands.au/places-to-go/gabrugal-yana/6-dharug-seasons/>