

## CHRISTMAS: A FEAST FOR YOUNG AND OLD

Sometimes people say that Christmas is really a time for children. There is a deal of truth in this. Children often show great wonder as they gaze at the decorations on a Christmas tree. They grow in excitement as Christmas draws near. Their faces light up as they unwrap Christmas presents. In many ways, Christmas is a special time for children.

Yet this feast is meant to be a feast for everyone – the young and the old and all those in between.

The gospel account of the first Christmas tells of a heavenly messenger appearing to shepherds and sharing news that was meant for all. “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ, the Lord”. The news was good news of great joy for *all the people*.

It was indeed news of great joy for children and we see later in the gospel story that children gave a lead in welcoming Jesus. So much so that Jesus urged all his followers to become like children in being open to his teaching.



Yet the news was meant for people of all ages. People in the middle years might be represented by the shepherds. Those who lived in the fields and kept watch over their flocks by night would have included some in the prime of life – with the health and strength to cope with the rigours of the outdoors and the demands of looking after the flocks. The message of Christmas came to them very directly.

Then there were representatives of senior citizens. After the account of the birth of Christ, the gospel tells of Mary and Joseph bringing the baby Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem. There they met an elderly man called Simeon and an elderly woman called Anna.

The gospel doesn't give us Simeon's age but suggests that he is elderly when it says that he had been “looking forward to the consolation of Israel” and that “it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's anointed”. When Mary and Joseph brought in the child Jesus, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: “Master, now you can dismiss your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation”.

In regard to Anna, the gospel describes her as a woman “of a great age”. A little further on we read that she was 84 years old. This would have certainly been considered “a great age” in those days when life-expectancy was much lower than it is today. When Mary and Joseph are in the temple with Jesus, Anna comes by and

begins to praise God and to speak about the child Jesus “to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”



As people celebrate Christmas nowadays, they often make it a feast for family gatherings, an occasion when the young and the old and the in-between spend time together. A family with small children, for example, might hop in the car and go to visit grandparents. The little ones can bring their energy and excitement, the parents can share their joy in their children and the grandparents' hearts can rejoice to see their children and grandchildren. All the generations together can celebrate the feast of Christ's birth.

Sometimes people also invite others to join their family celebration. It might be an elderly person who lives alone. When people make room for others at the table, Christmas is all the more as it should be – a feast of the Saviour who came to gather together the scattered children of God.

In September this year, the Australian Catholic Bishops published a document called *A Place at the Table: Social Justice in an Ageing Society*. Recognising that people are living longer, the document examines the need for genuine participation and considers the experiences of older people and how they contribute to our society. It highlights the unique value of older people's contributions, such as through volunteering or caring for family members. It also considers difficulties that older people may face, such as isolation and loneliness. Christmas provides us with a chance to reach out to anyone who might be isolated and welcome them to a common celebration.

It can be challenging to meet across the generations but we are enriched as people if we can share as a whole community – from the newborn child to the senior citizen.

May this Christmas continue to bring the blessings that come with gathering as a family – young and old together. And may the spirit of Christmas stay with us throughout the year. May we come together often, sharing our gifts, from the youngest to the oldest.

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