

A festive Christmas scene featuring a lit candle, pine branches, and berries against a background of bokeh lights.

# CHRISTMAS- A JOYOUS CELEBRATION!

By Bill Gillard

**D**espite the busyness and stress that surrounds the event of Christmas, I can always sense an underlying atmosphere running through our communities made up of expectancy and joy. I see this spirit shining forth on the faces of people as they walk through shopping centres; I hear it in the carols that are played in these centres as well as in the numerous Carols By Candlelight events held throughout Australia; I see it in the streets as increasing numbers of homes are decorated with lights depicting the manger scene and other symbols that represent this period of the year.

This spirit of joyous celebration was also present, as the birth of the Christ-child was made known to the major players in this divine miracle. Let's look at that familiar story again and see how this spirit of joy was experienced, as the story of Christmas unfolded.

In the months before Jesus was born, the Scriptures tell us that Mary traveled into the hill country, into a city of Judah where her cousin Elizabeth lived. Elizabeth was also expecting a child. When she heard the news of Mary's pregnancy, we are told the baby in Elizabeth's womb "leaped for joy" (Luke 1:44). And Mary's response to Elizabeth was in the words, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit rejoiceth in God my Saviour" (Luke 1:44,45). Excitement was most certainly in the air for those who knew the true identity of Mary's baby.

Following Jesus' birth, we are told of shepherds tending their flocks at night. Suddenly they were astounded and frightened by the appearance of an angel bringing them "good tidings of great joy" concerning the birth of the Christ child. And suddenly, joining the angel was a multitude of angels praising God by singing, "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth, peace; good will to men" (Luke 2:13, 14). After visiting the baby Jesus, the shepherds returned to their flocks "glorifying and praising God" for all the things they had heard and seen.

As was the Jewish custom, Mary and Joseph then took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem "to present him to the Lord." They brought Jesus before Simeon who had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ (Luke 2:26). After Simeon had given a blessing on the child and prophesied of the great things Jesus would do, Luke tells us that "Joseph, and Mary, marveled at those things which were spoken of the child." (Luke 2:33)

Anna, a prophetess who served in the Temple at that time, witnessed what had happened as Jesus was blessed, and we are told she gave thanks to God for this gift to the world.

The wise men from the east had followed a new star in the heavens that led them to where the baby Jesus resided. When they came to the place where the star shone, the scriptures tell us "they rejoiced with exceeding great joy" (Matt. 3:10). And they too celebrated the birth of this king by presenting the child with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

We can see from the well-loved stories surrounding Jesus' birth that there was a great deal of joyous celebration and thanks given to God for this gracious gift. And we are challenged to continue in this spirit of celebration during this Christmas time.

Unfortunately, it is so easy to become caught up in the busyness, the party-going, gift-shopping and family gatherings that dominate this period of the year that the One whose birthday we commemorate is almost completely forgotten.

For the Christian Church, Christmas is an excuse, no, an obligation for us to exalt and celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ into this world. Sure, we can commemorate Christ's birth in the normal way we are used to celebrating, with dinners and parties. But there are also more meaningful ways we can rejoice over this miracle birth – ways that only Christians know best.

The challenge for us is to keep Christ central. Celebrate His birth. Sing carols. Light the Advent and Christmas candles. Gather for family fun. Send Christ centred Christmas greetings. Even make shopping an occasion for remembering God's goodness. When we love Jesus and put Him first, He blesses our festivities.

Let's capture the joyous excitement of Christmas by refocusing our attention on the event we celebrate, rather than on the celebration of the event. It is Jesus' birth we are honouring, and that always makes for a joyous Christmas.