

"I think the joy of Christmas is the time we give to each other."

by Ben Smith, Australia Mission Centre President

This year I've had some incredibly joyous experiences with the birth of my daughter. I can recall so many fleeting moments where I've been in awe of just how much joy this life has brought to mine, and the community around me. I walk down the street and a sea of people walking past me smile as they see her face beaming back at them. It's as if she is spreading a wave of happiness as we move throughout the crowd.

I'm reminded about the obscure, little known part of the Jesus birth story where it was about 8 days later, and in Jewish culture the males are taken to the temple for 'purification'. Mary and Joseph hike on over to the temple in Jerusalem, which is about 9kms from where they are in Bethlehem, and offer up two turtle doves as a sacrifice as was the practice. Simeon, a good practicing Jew had been told by God that he was not going to die until he had seen the Messiah. Imagine being told that? The last prophet was some time before, and here he is thinking he's in it for the long haul. Yet, this week was different. The Spirit guided Simeon to go to the temple on this day, I don't know why, it doesn't say, but must have been something convincing. Boxing Day sales or something? Half price doves? He was convinced he must be there, so he hopped on his donkey (that parts not in there either but I doubt Uber was around then) and raced down there. He spotted Mary and Joseph and took Jesus in his arms. At this point Simeon was overcome. He was overcome with a sense that all is now right. This little person, this spirit, is of God. He said 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word'. Or, this is it, I can finally be at rest because as you promised, I have stayed alive to experience this moment. He continues, 'for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.' Lk 2:22-38.

Can you imagine, having a person you've never met hold your child and say those things? That they are the light of the world. That they are the reason that all people, regardless of their belief will trust that the world is good and will strive for peace. That all can be forgiven. Well, I am here to say that it happens. When

people hold a baby, they change. Any baby. A random's baby. I don't encourage or condone kidnapping, but with the consent of the parent and the child, hold a baby and try not to be changed by their spirit. Their trust in you. Their innate sense that joy is everything. That all new things are amazing. That each and every sound is a new and wonder-filled experience. Multiple times a day I am filled with the same sense of awe as Simeon. I don't think Pippa is any messiah, but I do think that all children of God possess this ability to help us get out of our funk, out of the commercial 'jobs and growth' mindset we seem to be stuck in as a society. Simeon's noticing of the Spirit of God in the child Jesus is the point. He stopped, listened to his heart, then went out of his way and acknowledged the power in this child and then said so!

But this is not just about babies. It's about a new kind of humanity. It's the birth of a new way, a peace filled way, a just way. Many times in the scriptures the birth of Jesus was announced as a great joy for all of the people. All of them. This was unusual because in that time and place it wasn't really important what all the people needed, really all that mattered was the people of Israel. This marked a new time in that God was to come to all people. It is significant because even in the verses before this in chapter 1 of Luke, Zechariah says that 'by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace'. This, my friends, is why it is so important that we don't miss the call to action of the birth story. It's not just about gifts and nice things, it's about justice! By the tender mercy of God, we are a people who are called to bring light to those in darkness. We are a people called and guided by the Spirit of God to become a wave of peace. The joy of Christmas is found when a person is freed from captivity, whether spiritual or physical. The joy of Christmas is found by providing shelter for a boy who has been couch surfing all year. The joy of Christmas is found by sharing food with a hungry woman and her family living in her car, that's the joy of Christmas and that's the hope of the gospel.

When our world says Christmas is about debt filled

cont. on page 26