

Yes, the Christmas Story Matters in New Zealand Today!

By Rex Morgan

Our lead article (pp. 3–5) asked if the Christmas story still matters, two thousand years later in the modern world. In an address to Parliament just prior to Christmas 2011, Green Party co-leader Russel Norman, even though he is an avowed atheist, eloquently explained that Christmas *does* matter in modern New Zealand. As he summed it up: ‘Christmas is a way to understand what really matters in life’.

Writing in the *NZ Herald*, noted commentator Jim Hopkins also came to a similar conclusion:

‘Christmas is a stock-take of sorts—if we allow it. It’s a chance to look at the gaps in the map of ourselves, the uncharted bits, the courses not taken and journeys not made, the fears given succour, the opportunities spurned. From time to time—and this, by its nature, is such a time—we should check our own moral compass and see where we sit on the spectrum of our expectations.

‘But that will happen only if we acknowledge the character and history of Christmas and allow some part of the holy day into the holiday. And that’s all but gone now. The spirituality of Christmas has been heedlessly stripped away by the Caesars of our age, who would have no rendering except to themselves’.¹

The following is quoted verbatim from the speech given to the NZ Parliament by Dr Russel Norman on 21 December 2011. These words are well worth thinking about at this time of year:

We’re about to break for Christmas, a time for family, sleeping in,

barbeques, trips to the beach, and spending time with our mates and family.

We will work hard and smart to repay the faith you’ve put in us to deliver a richer New Zealand with a smart green economy that works for everyone.

Our Christmas holiday has its roots firmly in the Jewish and Christian traditions. It’s based on a pretty amazing story about the birth of Jesus Christ—‘God in the flesh’ as many Christians believe.

The story of the incarnation of God in a baby born in a stable is remarkable even to me, an atheist, because it’s a story about the distant God of the heavens coming down to live amongst us on earth.

It’s a story about that God decreeing that tyranny on earth and utopia in the afterlife is not acceptable, and that freedom and equality must characterise life here on earth, as well as the afterlife in heaven. It’s a story of the birth of new hope.

The Christmas story tells us that a saviour of humanity came, not as some great warrior or prince, but wrapped instead in swaddling cloth—a baby born amongst farm animals, and in absolute poverty.

You know the rest. The shepherds in the field saw a bright star and followed it. Three wise men turned up with expensive-sounding gifts.

The baby grew up a carpenter in ancient Palestine, stirred up a lot of trouble later as a young man, and was executed by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, as legend has it sometime around AD 30.

But the story doesn’t end there. After his death the new hope that sprang from the stable in Bethlehem started to gather steam. Religious and political elites were threatened by the wild growth of a new religious sect committed to living out here on Earth the values of their God, once worshipped from afar.

The early Christians shared their resources and lived with greater equality amongst themselves than had earlier been known.



A Kiwi Christmas is about BBQs and trips to the beach with friends.

They believed that the world on earth could be a better place for ordinary people. Countless Christians were martyred for their faith, such was the threat that they posed to the ruling political and religious elites.

By AD 112, even the farmers cursed Christ's influence: Christian beliefs on idolatry were causing a slump in agricultural markets as people challenged the need to buy animals for ritual sacrifice to Roman emperors or gods.

Two thousand years later the story of the brief life of Jesus Christ still resonates.

This is why Christmas is still such an enduring part of our culture. Christmas was the start of some unlikely trouble and the start of new hope.

How the Story Touches Me

I'm not a Christian, and there is not historical certainty about the records in the Christian Bible. But what I admire about the Christmas story is that it speaks to values I share, including some that make me feel a little uneasy speaking from this place of privilege and power. I think you'll agree we're pretty far away from a Palestinian stable.

But like all parents, perhaps particularly those newly acquainted with the role, the story of change arriving in the form of a baby has resonance in my life.

And whether we're parents, grandparents, aunties, or friends, in our children we find our own awe at the beauty of our planet. They show us what it is to be truly open minded, and in their ferocious capacity to learn and grow and change we see that things could truly change and be better.

This Christmas we wish for all our babies to have their unquestioning need for love generously met. We wish that all our children are treated with patience and understanding, trust, and commitment. And we wish



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Dr. Russel Norman

that all our parents have the time, support, and resources necessary to give our children the best start in life.

And for us here in Parliament, I wish that we have the intelligence and compassion to choose to make things better for those who depend on us to make the right calls.

Christmas As a Way to Understand What Really Matters in Life

Mahatma Gandhi said this about Jesus Christ: 'I believe that Jesus belongs not only to Christianity but to the entire world, to all races and to all people'.

Ghandi was right. The hopes and values Jesus Christ articulated during the course of his short life are too important to belong only to Christians. They belong to us all: believers and non-believers alike. They live within us. They are embedded in our culture. They are

reflected in most of the world's major religions.

These are the values that help to lay down the essential nature of what it means to be human and guide us to live a 'good' life: good to ourselves, good to one another, and good to the world in which we make our livelihoods.

I identify with the Christianity that teaches love and compassion towards each other, especially the most vulnerable: the widows, the orphans, the sick, and those in prison. Those values inspired some of the world's first hospitals, orphanages, universities, and reforms to the way we treat those who've broken the law.

I also identify with the Christianity that demands we live with truth and justice with one another. Those values challenged the status quo on slavery in Great Britain and moved Martin Luther King to march for equal rights for African Americans.



Christians and community organisations show compassion for the poor, the lonely, and the homeless at Christmas.

And here, in our home, it was through applying those very same values that Michael Joseph Savage turned the state on its head in an attempt to offer cradle to grave security from poverty and despair. In fact, the very first act of the new Savage Government was to grant a special Christmas bonus payment to the unemployed. Now there was a true moment of Christmas in this Parliament that gave birth to a new hope that our political economy could be bent to protect the vulnerable. That was applied Christianity.

Finally, I identify with the Christianity that teaches an awe and respect for the natural world. The Christianity that says: 'Tread sacredly through nature because God incarnated himself in the world through the person of Jesus Christ'. St Francis of Assisi wrote sermons for the birds and taught us to live simply and value nature for its own sake. Listen to the dying words of Father Zosima, a character in the last work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, the great Christian novelist:

Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray

of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything,...you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.²

Notes

¹ 'Silent Night - Voice of Our History', Jim Hopkins, *NZ Herald*, 23 Dec., 2011.

² *The Brothers Karamazov*

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Auckland: The Mt. Eden Senior Citizens' Club Hall, Balmoral (corner Dominion Rd and Brixton Rd)
Saturdays at 2.00 pm.

(contact: Rex Morgan, ph. 09 489 8910)

Rotorua: Contact Peter Lindop, ph. 07 349 2272

Wellington: Thumbs Up
5 Elizabeth Street, Petone
Saturdays at 2:30 pm.

(contact: Dennis Gordon, ph. 04 386 2094)

Invercargill: The Southern Light Community Centre
64 Conon Street
Saturdays at 1:00 pm.

(contact: Les Evans, ph. 03 216 3680)

Other NZ locations: Small groups meet regularly in other cities nationwide. For details, contact Dennis Richards, ph. 06 353 6224 or visit www.wcg.org.nz