

The Light of Christmas

Reflection by Paul Smith

Introduction

Tania: I'm Tania Nelson.

Jo: And I'm Jo Chamberlain.

Tania: And you are listening to *Messages of hope*. Christmas time is here, and with it comes all the chaos of the festive season.

Jo: Well, what I've been noticing lately is how much light there is at Christmas time. You know how houses are dripping with fairy lights, and I think the bigger the better, who cares about the power bills! But you've got shopping centres that are covered in lights and Christmas trees and glitter and sparkle everywhere. And there's this community events as well, like the Carols by candlelight. It all seems to sort of focus around this idea of light.

Tania: Yeah. Even the sun decides to hang around that bit longer every day!

Jo: Yeah, we really do enjoy celebrating Christmas with light, don't we?

Tania: Well, I mean, as a Christian, the idea of light shining in the darkness is a very powerful one that goes back to well before Christmas was even celebrated. And we'll actually be hearing a bit more about that later in this program. But first, Jo, I want to hear more about what light at Christmas time means for you. Jo, in your family is light a big part of your Christmas tradition?

Jo: Well, it's interesting because we've had this conversation at home about how to put up the Christmas lights. We have the dripping ones that go across the veranda. I've also got it on my heart and my mind that one day I am going to have this Christmas star on my roof. We sit up on a hill and I'm hoping that as people drive past into the town, that they look up and see the light on the hill. For me, it's a reflection on the whole message behind Christmas that we want to shed light into this world.

Tania: I think that sounds tremendous. Well done you. For us, we put up the Christmas tree at the beginning of December. The lights are important on the Christmas tree, and certainly we turn them on each evening. But for me, I love going to community carols by candlelight kind of shows. And it's often in the early evening, children have candles or you know those fake candles, and they have glow sticks, and I just love it when it gets dark and you see the children enjoying glow sticks and they see the parents enjoying their candles or you know, those imitation candles and singing carols with those lights. I think it's just a really special time.

Jo: It's quite special and I think it brings out the awe and the wonder of Christmas, just that shedding of light into the world.

Tania: Absolutely. Our family always listens to the Music Bowl carol's by candlelight and the other one, the Carols in the Domain. And you know, to see the lights there. But, you know, I find that hearing the Christian carols are just really special to me. Even makes me a bit teary at times when I hear some of those special tunes at Christmas time.

Jo: Yeah. And you do get that sense of like just being around family connection, the specialness and the sacredness of being together.

Jo: I love seeing the idea of hope in the Christmas story too. What do you hope for at Christmas, Tania?

Tania: Well, I certainly love having the family around and we are all gathered. Of course, it's a celebration of Jesus coming to earth as my saviour, born as a baby. I also really appreciate peaceful times. Sometimes the lead up to Christmas is really quite hectic and I love having a time where I guess we're all in holiday mode and have time to reflect and it's a time of peace, and that's really quite precious to me as well.

Leading up to Christmas

Tania: So Jo, have you got an Advent calendar in your household?

Jo: Yeah, we use the Advent calendar right at the beginning of the Advent season. My kids actually look forward to this. It's a pretty big thing and we've got little pockets in it. And in each pocket, there's a little piece of paper and often there's a Bible reading, but there's also like a question or an activity to do. The kids look forward to it every night. They go, 'Mum, can we do this one?' 'No it's my turn!' 'No, it's my turn!' But the concept of doing it is that we do sit and reflect on particular elements of the Christmas story, and that way the kids can journey with us in this holiday season to actually unpack and explore those concepts of hope, joy, love, and peace at Christmas.

Tania: I love how you as a family have taken Advent calendars seriously. I've got a confession to make, Jo, my granddaughter's living at our house at the moment, and she's got one of these advent calendars, a commercial one. I think she's got a Bluey one this year (it shows her age). But you know, I have to laugh, it's really got nothing to do with Christmas.

Jo: Yeah. And I guess it's kind of cute to do that whole countdown thing, but what are they counting down to? Is it just more presents or is it something more significant or special?

And I guess that's why I don't ever want to lose that spirit of Christmas, and that is this hope, this joy, this peace.

Tania: So let's hear a message now from Pastor Paul about light and Christmas.

Pastor Paul Smith's Message

Paul: There's a remote town in far north Queensland called Chillagoe. It's completely surrounded by cave systems above the ground and below the ground. And I grew up in that part of Australia and I went to Chillagoe many times with my scouting group from my hometown of Atherton.

The Atherton Scout Group would camp at Chillagoe for a whole week living in tents and exploring various cave systems under the care of our wise Scout leader, Alan Sims. We knew him as Simsy. The amazing adventure of caving was certainly my number one outdoor activity growing up. And caving taught me so much about teamwork and about sharing resources, because when 12 people go into a cave for a day's caving, 12 of you need to come out again at the end of the day.

But caving also ushered me into another extraordinary experience of darkness. We modern people are so used to our light switches and torches and streetlights that we don't get much experience of darkness. But caving was different. We would be climbing and crawling for an hour or so in the very centre of a cave, deep underground. Then everyone in the group would pause for a break and sitting together on the floor, we would turn off our helmet lights. And it was dark, very dark. You could put your hand right in front of your face and see nothing. Then someone would turn on just one light, and suddenly you could see.

There is a different kind of darkness when we don't know the face of God. Without God's face revealed as God wants to be known, we don't know that God is gracious and merciful or that God would be interested in us. The Bible teaches us that God is revealed in the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. This good news is like a light being turned on. Because we know God's heart in Jesus Christ, we can talk to God, trusting for Jesus' sake, that God answers our prayers, our joyful prayers, our cries for help, our hopes, our fears.

The image of light shining in the darkness is central to the stories of the Old and New Testament. At the very beginning of the Bible, the voice of the Lord speaks in creation: *'Let there be light.'* Then one of the Bible verses that is so often read at Christmas time declares: *'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.'* This is applied directly to Jesus Christ. He is the light of the world who brightens our darkness with the good news of God's great love and mercy towards us. I thank God that December 25th continues as a public holiday that we can pause to pray and to remember with thanksgiving this good news of light shining in the darkness.

In our Christmas celebrations, we have opportunity to share this time and its message of hope with family, with friends, with the whole world.

'O little town of Bethlehem' is a famous and well-loved carol, written by English writer Philip Brooks, that teaches us to sing of the joyful but stark image of light in the midst of darkness. Let me read for you the opening verse:

'O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.'

So, as you go into Christmas with all the shopping and planning and advertising and the giving of gifts, listen for the Christmas songs about light in dark places. This is the hope-filled good news that our Lord Jesus is the light of the world who has revealed God's heart as God always for us.

And as you listen to the carols, you might also find yourself caught up in Christmas, Carol-praying as happens with so many Christmas carols. When you sing right through Philip Brooks carol 'O Little Town of Bethlehem', you find yourself praying when you sing with the words of the last verse:

'O holy child of Bethlehem descend to us, we pray.
Cast out our sin and enter in be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell,
O, come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel.'

May our gracious Lord who is the light of the world, bless and protect you and your loved ones throughout this Christmas season.

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