

The background features a large, dark grey triangle pointing downwards, centered on a red background. The triangle is bordered by a thick black line. At the top, several white-outlined arrows point towards the center of the triangle. The bottom corners of the image are filled with teal and yellow geometric shapes.

WHERE LOVE AND JUSTICE MEET

Advent Christmas Devotional

INTRO

The Christmas Advent season is about anticipating the coming of Jesus - both celebrating his birth and looking forward to his return. We can miss the meaning of Christmas if we're wrapped up in the bows and busyness. Likewise, when we're busy doing life 365 days/year, we can miss the opportunities God puts in our path to act justly.

There's something special about viewing Jesus' birth as the catalyst of justice here on earth. His coming was part of the redemption and our access to a relationship with God. Our aim for this devotion booklet is to focus on justice as it relates to Christmas. We've also looked at how Covid has impacted our world and thinking through the hope that God's given us during and after this pandemic.

We're hoping that this devotion provides a space for you to pause and reflect - anticipating 25 Dec when you'll worship and celebrate the birth of Christ with The Church.

Written by the M5 Congregation for their
Christmas Justice sermon series & Advent month.

For the digital version of this devotional, visit
www.commongood.org.za/resources/

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1

THE COMPASSIONATE INNKEEPER

And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed,^[b] who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

- Luke 2:3-7

We see from this story that Joseph and Mary travelled to the town of Bethlehem for the census registration. Imagine for a moment upon their arrival, the town of Bethlehem buzzing with activity as many people were trying to secure accommodation for the night. One could assume that Joseph and Mary possibly approached several innkeepers. They were exhausted and hungry from traveling, and they were desperate to find shelter because Mary was about to give birth....what a dilemma!

At the last door that they possibly knocked on, the innkeeper also indicated that there were no rooms available. We see the kindness being extended towards the couple by the innkeeper because he made a plan and offered them the only spot available, which was amongst the animals in the stable. In so doing, he showed compassion towards a homeless couple in desperate need. Little did he know that the King of Kings was about to be born on his property.

This story does not mention the innkeeper, therefore we do not know much about who the innkeeper was.

What we do know is that he had compassion on a family in need. He found a way to make room for them and in doing so, he provided a birthplace for the Savior of the world – Jesus Christ.

Imagine for a moment that you are busy setting the table for dinner on Christmas Eve - your guests have arrived and your home is buzzing with festivities. Suddenly you hear a knock at the door and when you open it, you see a couple who tell you they have no money for a shelter and are hungry. Would you send them away or welcome them in? What would you do?

We see beautiful examples from the life of Jesus, who always demonstrated compassion towards those whom He encountered, from feeding the hungry multitudes, to healing the sick, to raising the dead and blessing the little children - Jesus was often inconvenienced and yet showed compassion to those in need.

REFLECTION

While Christmas is often about enjoying delicious food and giving and receiving gifts, it is the perfect time to reflect on the love and compassion of our heavenly Father, who knew our need for a Savior and sent His only Son Jesus Christ to save us from our sin.

Let us be people who show compassion this Christmas season . . . no matter how small or insignificant it may seem, because you never know the impact it could make to someone's life. So the best and greatest gift we can give this Christmas, is to show the compassion of Christ to those in need.

See our [Going Deeper resources \(No. 1& 2\)](#) for more on this.

2

WHAT CHRISTMAS MEANS TO US POST-COVID

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

- Luke 2:8-12

Jesus coming to earth was radical. It was a gift given to unlikely people, in an unlikely place. We see here in Luke 2 that there was great fear, then great hope, and this gave the unlikely shepherds, and Mary and Joseph, great purpose.

In some ways, Covid has reminded us of our purpose. Our schedules, busyness and social lives came to a screeching halt, and many experienced waves of fear followed by hope, and then cycled back to fear again. We weren't defined by the work we did - that didn't seem so important anymore - but rather the heart behind it. This was jarring but it gave us all the opportunity to really seek Jesus and come face to face with our relationship (or lack thereof) with Him.

Take this time to think upon all that's changed or the trials that you've faced recently. Are you full of fear or full of hope? And then consider:

We can thank God for our slowing.

We can re-think and reimagine our true purpose here on earth - to glorify Him.

We can be appreciative of God being our refuge and strength in our time of trouble (Psalm 46:1).

We can be reminded that God knows our needs.

We can lean on the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39).

We remember being the church, not gathering in a church building.

We can be reminded that our lives are fleeting and that being a disciple, loving the Lord will keep our eyes turned upward.

Fear not. Christmas is Good News! Jesus came to lay his life down for us (John 15:13). Jesus came to be our example of making things right - the pure definition of "justice" - what ought to be. We don't merely celebrate a birthday on Dec 25th. We celebrate that God came to earth as the significant part of the Gospel story. May we remember Your whole story this Christmas. May we take stock of Your love and work in the world even when things aren't the way we imagined.

PRAYER

God, we recognize that Your birth rocked the world. We thank you for how we are able to look back and see Your hand in our lives in our own trials this year. Help us make this Christmas season one of pause and reflection on the lessons you want to teach us.

See our [Going Deeper resources \(No. 3\)](#) for more on this.

3

FIT FOR A KING

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

- Matthew 2:1-2

And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

- Matthew 2:11-12

The story of the wise men visiting Jesus after His birth is one of the most well known aspects of the Christmas story. Each year, as people across the world enthusiastically sing the carol "We three kings", most imagine three men galloping across the desert on camels, guided only by a bright star in the night sky. Their purpose? To find Jesus, and bring their gifts of worship – gold, frankincense, myrrh,

There are a few inaccuracies in this popular Christmas narrative. For example, it's not clear there were 3 men, but possibly 12; and they probably weren't kings. The wise men were from the East and were pagan astrologers. In all likelihood, these men acted as personal advisors to the kings they served, reading the stars and offering advice and guidance on important policy matters related to the government of the day. The modern day equivalent would be an advisor to the President or a member of his cabinet. These were men who were used to being in the presence of a king, but were themselves people of stature and favour in life. They had royal connections, wealth, and were trusted by Herod. Talk about the definition of privilege!

Yet, the appearance of the wise men in the Christmas story reminds us that from the start, the story of redemption is an inclusive one that turns privilege on its head. Despite the fact that the wise men were Gentiles, they are amongst the first people to offer their worship to Jesus, the promised Messiah of the Jewish people. This act of worship by these men of science, outsiders to the Jewish faith, is not recorded by accident in Matthew's gospel. It reminds us that God's heart in moving towards us has always been for ALL people, and that ALL are welcome to bring worship if their heart is to seek God – rich and poor, male and female, believer and non-believer, young and old, scientist and non-scientist alike. (And as an aside – how beautiful that we see the coming together of science and faith right there at the birth of Jesus!)

The second thing we are reminded of from the story of the wise men is that despite their own privilege and status, they leave behind the comfort of their status and position in the royal court, to willingly seek out Jesus, a promised Messiah born into poverty, in less than glamorous circumstances – the child of an out-of-wedlock teen mother, an artisan father, a child refugee from a small unsophisticated town. These men would have been used to people seeking them out; coming to the royal court, bringing gifts for them and the king, and paying tribute. Yet, their actions turn their privilege on its head. On the basis of prophecy about a promised Messiah, they move out of their comfort zone towards a marginalised baby boy in an obscure location in dire poverty. And they bring good, and lavish gifts – they don't skimp and bring second-best. No – they bring gifts fit for a King because despite the outward appearances of this baby boy born into disadvantaged circumstances, they recognise that He is God.

REFLECTION

As we ponder this story, let's thank God that His heart is for ALL people, and let's pray for people-groups who may be marginalised in society.

Let's check our own heart attitudes by asking "Are there any people-groups I think God would not have welcomed at the birth of Jesus", and if we answer yes, let's repent of that heart attitude and pray for those people instead.

Let's reflect on our own privilege, and the comforts we enjoy this Christmas season, and ask God to show us how we can respond to prophecy (Isaiah 61:1-4) and move towards those who are marginalised in our neighbourhoods, our city, and our nation.

And let's be sure that when we bless those around us who may be in disadvantaged circumstances, let's bless them with lavish, good gifts that recognises that they too have been created in the image of God. (Genesis 1:27)

The Immigrants Creed (by Jose Luis Casal)

I believe in Almighty God,
who guided the people in exile and in exodus,
the God of Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon,
the God of foreigners and immigrants.
I believe in Jesus Christ, a displaced Galilean,
who was born away from his people and his home, who fled
his country with his parents when his life was in danger.
When he returned to his own country he suffered under the oppression of Pontius Pilate,
the servant of a foreign power. Jesus was persecuted, beaten, tortured, and unjustly
condemned to death.
But on the third day Jesus rose from the dead,
not as a scorned foreigner but to offer us citizenship in God's kingdom.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the eternal immigrant from God's kingdom among us,
who speaks all languages, lives in all countries,
and reunites all races.
I believe that the Church is the secure home
for foreigners and for all believers.
I believe that the communion of saints begins
when we embrace all God's people in all their diversity.
I believe in forgiveness, which makes us all equal before God,
and in reconciliation, which heals our brokenness.
I believe that in the Resurrection
God will unite us as one people
in which all are distinct and all are alike at the same time.
I believe in life eternal, in which no one will be foreigner
but all will be citizens of the kingdom
where God reigns forever and ever.
Amen.

See our [Going Deeper resources \(No. 4\)](#) for more on this.

4

A PROMISE OF A NEW ORDER - A RULER OF PEACE

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

- Isaiah 9:6

Centuries before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah prophesied about this Child whose name would signify the presence of God (Immanuel, God with us) and who would bear the responsibility of governing his people. He would carry the burdens of his people on his shoulders.

This prophecy came at a time when Israel was looking for an immediate remedy to their physical and political problems, where they needed to be saved from their enemies and the structures and rulers that oppressed them. And here was the promise: a Ruler that would bring a new order and that would govern with peace. As much as Jesus would save his people from their sin, He would save them (us) from these systems of oppression. God's solution wouldn't come for centuries, but it would come (Luke 1:69-71) and it would last forever (Isaiah 9:7).

Jesus rules to this day and his governance is characterised by peace. The full meaning of peace - shalom - is so much more than the absence of war. It also speaks about the presence of wholeness, completeness, harmony, prosperity and welfare. Shalom also refers to restoration and reconciliation. Imagine a Ruler that promises and delivers on that!

However, when we look around us in South Africa, we don't have to look far to see that there is an absence of this peace, this shalom, in a majority of our communities. Instead of the absence of war, we witness gunshots, young children killed in drive-by shootings, woman and children being raped, domestic violence, police brutality, emergency vehicles and workers (people who are saving lives) under attack, bullying at schools and child abuse. Instead of the presence of wholeness, prosperity and welfare, we witness children who do not have access to quality education, families trying to survive on a minimum wage that is far below meeting their basic needs, looting because our brothers and sisters are so tired of and angry about their living situation, limited access to health care and housing and water and sanitation. We witness how sidewalks in some communities receive new pots of flowers or Christmas lights for the festive season, while their neighbours don't have street lights, with fewer police patrolling their streets and sidewalks stacked with undisposed bags of garbage. Despite many efforts, we also see that there is still not a lot of restoration or reconciliation between the people of our country. There is not a great spirit of making things right.

When our eyes and hearts open to this, it might seem as if Isaiah's prophecy - God's promise - was as empty as the promises our politicians make the days before elections. However, it was not.

God's promise, Isaiah's prophesy was fulfilled. Jesus was born so our spiritual hearts, as well as our land, our home, our people, can experience Peace. As Christ followers, who accepted this Peace into our lives, we should play a part in the peace that should also rule our relationships and our country. We should take note and take action of the systemic inequalities, the brokenness, which is not as God intended, and play our part in ushering in God's Kingdom on earth.

REFLECTION

Where in your spiritual life do you need a ruling of Shalom?

Where in your physical life, do you witness an absence of Shalom? Where do you witness the presence of God's peace?

Where in the lives of, and your relationships with, your South African neighbours, do you witness an absence of this Shalom that God promised?

What role can you play in your community, your work, your church to ensure systemic Shalom prevails?

See our [Going Deeper resources \(No. 5\)](#) for more on this.

5

WHO IS IN MY NEIGHBOURHOOD?

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.

- John 1:14 (The Message)

A couple of times a week I have the privilege of cycling to work. I ride through quite different neighborhoods. I begin in middle class Claremont where the houses are well kept and continue my ride into Rondebosch, past some of the most expensive schools and houses in South Africa. As I move towards the city along Liesbeek Parkway into Salt River the change in neighborhood becomes stark as I pass numerous homeless neighborhoods, where people with nowhere to go have found open land upon which to erect a shelter. No access to services, no where to go to the toilet in privacy and with dignity. This scene is replicated throughout the City of Cape Town and is the lived reality of much of its population.

As I read the verse above, I can't help but wonder if Jesus had to come in our times, which neighborhood would he move into? What would his "dwelling" (the word used in the NIV) look like? In fact, he lived in a home that did not befit his Kingly status. And if we read Jesus' words responsibly, it's clear that he was not bringing good news for the rich (in fact he bemoaned how difficult it is for them to enter the Kingdom of God) but in His own words to "proclaim good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18).

It's tempting however to only understand Jesus' words spiritually, as if they have nothing to do with the physical, material world in which we live. If that were so, consider this - why would Jesus have come in flesh and blood, as a human being? If God was only interested in the spiritual, why not just send the Holy Spirit to reside in our hearts, and teach us how to be set free from the material aspects of life?

Jesus needed us to understand that He dwells as much on earth as he does in heaven, in our neighborhood as much as in our hearts. And that He intends to bring His Kingdom reign in both realms.

So how do we need to respond to the fact that Jesus came to live in a poor neighborhood, and that He very intentionally spoke about the upliftment of the oppressed (the poor, disabled, woman, the foreigner, the orphan) and their inclusion into His earthly kingdom? How am I called to bring about the "neighbourly justice" that Jesus inaugurated through his physical dwelling on earth? In the same way Jesus interrupted the history of the world through His birth, how do I interrupt the contrasting neighborhoods that make up Cape Town?

PRAYER

Lord, thank you that you came to earth to dwell with us; that right from the beginning of creation, your intention has always been to make your home with us and to restore relationship with us. Help me Lord to understand what it means to bring about neighbourly justice. Give me eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to respond to as You did to the injustices and inequalities that characterise our City Challenge me Lord, and move me to action in Your Name. Amen.

See our [Going Deeper resources \(No. 6 & 7\)](#) for more on this.

6

GOOD & PERFECT GIFTS

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

- James 1:17

What are you hoping to get for Christmas? My kids have had their wish lists stuck on the fridge since the first week in November, and they're great. They include slime, unicorn toys, soccer boots and a kiddies sized, rideable Land Rover. These are the kinds of gifts that my 7 and 9 year old consider to be good and perfect gifts.

The Bible is full of great promises to hold on to like this favourite from James 1:17- "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights". Woohoooo... This is great – We. Get. PRESENTS!!!!

Perfect Presents

So, let's go back to the beginning of the passage in James 1:2-5 to find out what the perfect gifts are that James is talking about here. Spoiler alert – plot twist ahead.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

- James 1: 2-5

Wait, WHAT?!

How did we go from receiving great presents to facing trials and perseverance to the point that even our faith is tested?

Let me set the scene.

The writer is James, Jesus' brother - not James the disciple. He had gone from being a sceptic (Read John 7:2-5) to a leader of the church in Jerusalem, and even Paul referred to him as "Pillar" of the church (Galatians 2:9).

James wrote this letter to the people of the church in Jerusalem who had run scared and scattered after Stephen was martyred for his faith. Times were tough, and this was a letter of encouragement to them to keep the faith and "vasbyt" in the face of trials and oppression.

It's widely believed that this was written around 45AD, making it the earliest writings of the New Testament. If this is the first thing God inspired to be written for His New Testament it must be important.

It is not a stretch of the imagination to find the parallel between the 2 years of Covid and James' words – trials, testing, perseverance. Our worlds have been rocked, and our new normal is, well, actually rather hard. Many of us have lost a lot – opportunities, comfort, jobs, and most of us have lost loved ones.

James' words of encouragement to the early church are so relevant for us today: We consider it JOY to face trials. Why? Because in the testing of our faith the result is perseverance. And if perseverance is allowed to do what perseverance does, then it leads to maturity and wisdom. These are God's GOOD and PERFECT gifts to us! Isn't it like our God to take the hardships we face and turn them into something so valuable?

I love how Charles Spurgeon summed it up. He said: "I've learned to kiss the waves that throw me up against the Rock of Ages."

REFLECTION & PRAYER

Pray for those feeling weighed down in trials and oppression - that God would be near, bring freedom, and that the result would be maturity and wisdom.

Thank God for His goodness, and His good gifts to you. Pray that He would allow you to "count it all joy" as we navigate this season.

When we give gifts at Christmas time, it's a symbol of the ultimate gift that God has given to us through Jesus. I find it interesting that even those who don't follow Christ give gifts for Christmas. Let's pray that as they participate in the superficial activities of Christmas, that God will speak to them about His good and perfect gifts to us. May we also be bold and tell others about Jesus during this season.

See our [Going Deeper resources \(No. 8 & 9\)](#) for more on this.

7

THE HEART OF GOD

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

- John 3:16-17

Christmas is our celebration of the birth of Christ, good news of great joy for all people! When God took on human form in the person of Jesus Christ and ushered in the rule and reign of God on earth, He proclaimed the heart of God for humanity, the earth and the entire cosmos. The heart of God reveals the purpose and plan of God, His original intent for His creation. In the person of Jesus Christ this heart is fleshed out and lived in a concrete reality, a defined moment in human history, the Roman conquest of the then-known world.

This was a context where the Jewish nation was subject to the harsh dominion of the Roman Empire which affected every area of their lives. The Roman Empire assumed control and ownership of all resources, natural and produced, resulting in a wealthy Roman minority who lived in extravagant excess at the expense of the mostly Jewish, poor masses. The status quo was maintained at all cost by unrelenting militaristic control combined with alliance with the religious elite who secured for themselves and their families relative comfort in return. Disruption of this "eternal now" status quo was immediately stamped out sending an unambiguous message to the fearful, oppressed peasant class. The Emperor was considered divine and appointed by the gods, in some cases the very representation of the gods.

It is into this socio-economic, political reality that Jesus is born to an unwed teenage mother betrothed to a lowly carpenter. Jesus locates himself with the poor, oppressed peasants of his day and when the time comes, boldly stands in the synagogue and proclaims that the words of Isaiah 61 have come to fulfillment (Luke 4:18,19)! He ushers in the reign of God and works courageously towards its fulfillment in His context, subverting the status quo and proclaiming good news to the poor, recovery of sight for the blind and freedom for the prisoners and the oppressed!

As His church we are called to follow the supreme example of Jesus and work toward the Kingdom of God which is an already and not yet reality. This calls us to live with a worldview that is radically different to society at large, to have a heart for the poor and marginalized, the oppressed and voiceless in society. Not just have a heart but practically live in a way that fleshes out the Word of God in our present context and to work towards the realization of the Kingdom of God that Jesus ushered in.

As we celebrate Christmas with family and friends this year, enjoying the pleasures of the festive season, how can we be intentional about sharing the joy with those on the margins?

How do we remain true to the example of Jesus, who located himself with the poor and oppressed in society to share the gracious love of God and the good news of the Kingdom?

The birth of Jesus is good news and freedom for all people!

PRAYER

May God, the source of life and blessing, bless you so that all suffering – poverty, disease, famine, political conflict – would end. May God bless you so that you experience ubuntu, peace and solidarity. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

See our [Going Deeper resources \(No. 10\)](#) for more on this.

8

THE GIFT OF TIME

Give, and it will be given to you.

- Luke 6:38

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

- 2 Corinthians 9:7

A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.

- Proverbs 11: 25

There are so many wonderful scriptures in the Bible which encourage us to give. But what does it mean to give? According to the Oxford Dictionary, "to give" is explained as to freely transfer the possession of something to someone, a definition often associated with material possessions. For example, donating clothes to a local charity, or donating money to a great cause.

But giving is so much more than transferring material possession from one person to the other. Giving is also about investing your time to a great cause - using more than possessions as a currency, but also your time, energy, and spiritual gifts. Offering your expertise as a recruiter to look through CVs to support people to get employed in your local community, or to make time to do weekly check-ins with friends, family, or loved ones going through a difficult time.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us of how important time is and what a valuable gift it is to give. It has slowed us down and made us critically reassess our valuable time. We are not rushing as much (well, I hope), to get things done, chasing deadlines, and ticking off to-do lists. Instead, the pandemic has allowed us to have more moments of reflection and quiet time. With the opportunity for quiet time we've had, the more we've been asking ourselves "How can I use the gift of time to better the world around me?". And the answer is quite simple: Prayer.

Prayer is such an important part of who we are as Christians. It's our time with God where we are communicating our hopes and casting all our worries and concerns to him because we know He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). And when we do cast all our worries to God, we get an amazing feeling of relief of comfort or relaxation, because we know God has got it worked out. So now that life has slowed down a bit and we have the gift of time (maybe we are not rushing to work in the morning and then rushing home in the evening to make supper)- let's gift one another the gift of time by praying for each other. Let's not just cast our worries to God, but the worries and concerns of our friends, families, and colleagues. Let's also pray for our country, the world, and our leaders, not just at this time of the year, but every day.

REFLECTION

As we countdown to one of the most important days on the Christian calendar, I would like for you in your journal or diaries during your quiet time to identify different people within your community, at work, your friends and family to pray for. Let's all use the gift of time that we have been given to pray for each other and let all feel the peace of understanding that comes with prayer, that God has got everything worked out!

See our [Going Deeper resources \(No. 11\)](#) for more on this.

9

CONSIDER & RESPOND

Thus says the LORD, "execute judgement and righteousness and deliver the plundered out of the hands of the oppressor. Do no wrong and do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless or the widow. Nor shed innocent blood in this place.

- Jeremiah 22:3

These words were prophesied by the prophet Jeremiah around 626 B.C. to the King Zedekiah, King of Judah. These words called for action - dispense judgement or reap the consequences. Zedekiah was warned. Jeremiah was not popular. He faced much opposition, persecution and personal rejection for 50 years. But God promises Jeremiah that He will be with him at all times. Jeremiah prophesied during a period when Judah was experiencing political peace.

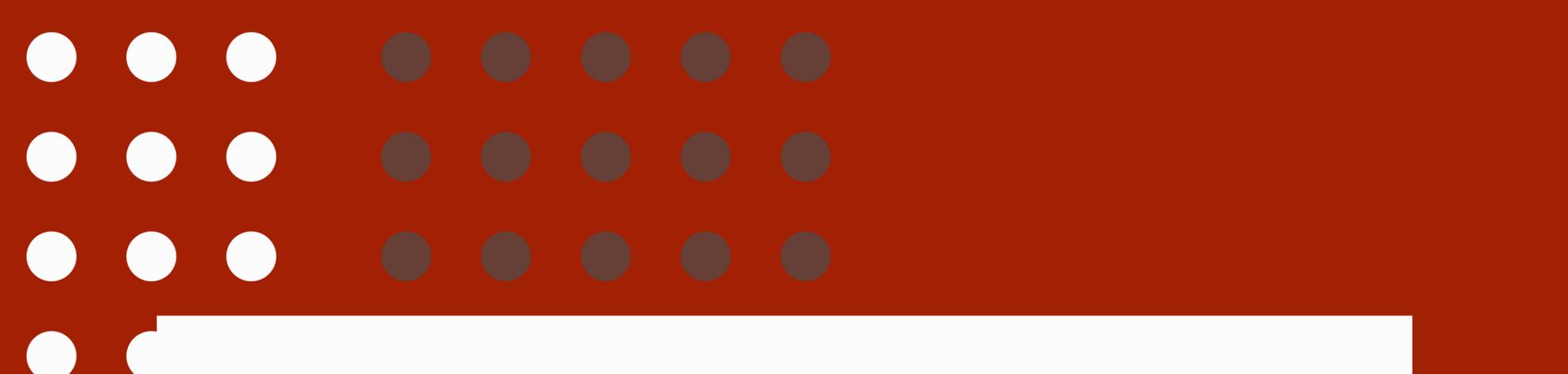
Down the corridors of time, these words of prophecy could be penned into our South African context. Look Into our political , social ,educational, economical, judicial and health (including the psycho-social) platforms. We could bring the call even closer to our ears, to Cape Town, known as THE TALE OF TWO CITIES because of the great disparities, the great divide, between the rich and the poor, widened due to the Covid Pandemic.

Consider the hollow echoes off the walls in the chambers of Parliament. "Pay back the money," land reform, redistribution without compensation, fees must fall, houses for the homeless, free education for all, increase social grants to relieve poverty and hunger, clean water for all citizens, proper sanitation for all. And the list of problems seems never-ending - gender based violence, atrocities against women and children, human trafficking especially with woman and children, fatherless households with no male role models, teenage pregnancies amongst high school learners, uncontrolled drug abuse, and xenophobic attacks against foreign nationals.

Despite the command in Jeremiah 22:3 to "do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless or the widow. Nor shed innocent blood in this place", these atrocities fill our city.

On the walls in those chambers could be the words of Nelson Mandela , "both oppressor and oppressed are deprived of their humanity".

Jeremiah predicted the innocent blood that would be shed in Judah, and this was fulfilled when Herod sent his soldiers to Bethlehem to kill all the boys under two years of age. Jesus was born into a world dominated by the powerful, violent Roman Empire - the oppressed and the oppressor. It is also believed, traditionally, that the 3 wise men who brought their gifts, of gold, frankincense and myrrh were of different ethnic backgrounds. The shepherds who are believed to have been rough, rugged and mostly uneducated, had the privilege of seeing the angel stand before them, and the glory, splendour, and radiance of the Lord shone around them. The heavenly beings who stand before our Holy God came to the shepherds to bring the praise song "Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill toward all men." How ironic that the shepherds, a group of men who would usually have been invisible to many in society, and certainly not the type you invited home for dinner, became the first evangelists (Luke 2:17). They made widely known this saying which was told to them concerning the child. God is indeed an all inclusive God.



As we read the Christmas story we read that Jesus was surrounded by the ills of society as emphasised in Jeremiah's prophecy. Jesus addressed these ills in His teachings, stories and parables - the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31); Jesus interacts with the Samaritan woman at the well of Shechem (John 4:1-24); the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37); and the Widow's two mites (Mark 12: 41-44). These are stories that we can ponder on as we consider and respond to the social injustices in our city. And as we do, let's pay careful heed to welcome and care for the foreigner, the widow, and the fatherless.

PRAYER

Search me oh God and know my heart. Try me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me. And lead me in the way everlasting.
AMEN.

See our [Going Deeper](#) resources (No. 12 & 13) for more on this.

10

LIVING SOCIAL JUSTICE AS JESUS TAUGHT

If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary, if I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the fatherless— but from my youth I reared them as a father would, and from my birth I guided the widow— if I have seen anyone perishing for lack of clothing, or the needy without garments, and their hearts did not bless me for warming them with the fleece from my sheep, if I have raised my hand against the fatherless, knowing that I had influence in court, then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint. For I dreaded destruction from God, and for fear of his splendour I could not do such things.

- Job 31:16-23

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

- James 2:15-17

As a young person, social justice has always intrigued me, and so did the Word of God, where I found messages of hope, equality, and freedom. I remember being intrigued by the story of Jesus's birth. Why would the son of God be born in a manger? A manger is stinky, it's smelly, and it's grim. Growing up, our next-door neighbour had different kinds of animals so I should know!

I always wondered if Mary had a clean sheet to lay the baby Jesus on and who helped her give birth.

As I grew older, I grew to dislike this festive season. That may be unpopular to say, but it's the truth, Christmas did not bring our family the ultimate joy as movies taught us! Jesus was not to be found anywhere. It is exactly at Christmas that we can see the differences between the rich and the poor. I call Christmas ads, "jingle tills," - you know the ones, the ones that tell you that you need to buy your loved one this perfume or your kids this special toy.

I asked myself, did Jesus die for this? Did he die for trees covered in tinsel, for expensive gifts under the trees, for tables with food, and for debt in January. Families who have nothing are enticed to spend their bonuses buying "stuff." As they are pressured by society and social media to use that bonus "if you love your family" or they hear, "this is how you do Christmas, spending money with reckless abandon."

Then I am reminded that Jesus was born and died for the poor, the weary, the widows, the immigrants, the orphans, the marginalised, the broken, the judged, even the people no one else wanted! He taught us how to share, to stand in the gap for the oppressed and the marginalised. To be a voice for the voiceless. When he was surrounded by the huge crowd, he fed them. When he saw a blind man, he healed him. When Jairus's daughter lay dying, he raised her from the dead. He was Action Focused, he did not say "go in peace and may God fill your hunger" - no, he encouraged and gave practical support.

Jesus was born as the ultimate sacrifice, the lamb of God, to take away the sin of the world. His birth should be a reminder of how to reach out to his church, his people, and the world. While Christmas may give us a reason to gather together for festivities around a table, there is reason to celebrate His birth every day - thankful hearts for His ultimate sacrifice! Through baby Jesus, God brought his salvation to earth! But it's also a reminder to stand in the gap for the very people that Jesus stood up for, whether that be in prayer, or through practical actions that can bring life and hope to those in need.

Last year my boys and I chose to do Christmas differently. No expensive gifts under the trees, no large tables of food. Instead we chose to spend our money wisely and give within our budget. It was just us around our table - eating and sharing about the year past and wondering what it would be like the coming year. It was different. It was peaceful and special. I'd encourage you to scale Christmas within your means and make it reflective and simple.

REFLECTION / ACTION

What if you did Christmas differently this year?

- You could host a picnic lunch in park for the homeless,
- Purchase your gifts from small businesses.
- Donate gently loved toys to children in the township via an organisation you know.
- Offer to pay for the school stationery requirements or Jan school fees for a family who might struggle financially.
- You could bake special treats and share them with an old age home.
- Invite a family to share a lunch with you.

See our [Going Deeper resources \(No. 14 & 15\)](#) for more on this.

GOING DEEPER

1. Homeless Jesus
www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlrN4x5xDrM
2. Common Good resource: Responding to homelessness
www.commongood.org.za/resources/homelessness/
3. Common Good resource: The role of the church under COVID-19
www.commongood.org.za/resources/covid-19/
4. Common Good resource: Caring for foreign nationals/immigrants
www.commongood.org.za/resources/foreign-nationals/
5. Understanding shalom
www.bibleproject.com/explore/video/shalom-peace/
6. Justice from Below
<https://youtu.be/yxJld8cdScw>
7. Common Good resource: Responding to poverty
www.commongood.org.za/resources/responding-to-poverty/
8. World Vision ideas for gifting
<https://donate.worldvision.ca/pages/gift-catalogue>
9. Isaiah 60 One Helping Hands Ministry
www.facebook.com/1545850135679860/posts/2999569346974591/
10. Common Good resource: Lifestyle of justice
www.commongood.org.za/resources/lifestyle-of-justice/
11. Common Good resource: Gift of Time
www.commongood.org.za/resources/gift-of-time/
12. Common Good resource: Violence against women
www.commongood.org.za/resources/violence-against-women/
13. Common Good resource: Race, inequality and division
www.commongood.org.za/resources/race-inequality-division/
14. Common Good resource: Re-imagining Christmas
www.commongood.org.za/resources/christmas/
15. An idea a day for Advent
www.cpodigital.org/toolkit-content/an-idea-a-day-for-advent

NOTES

