



The news from Bethlehem this year has not been good. It is caught up in the ongoing hostilities between Palestinians and Israelis. There has not been peace on earth.

Is Bethlehem a symbol for our times? It intrudes itself into our daily news at a time when the message of what happened there 2,000 years ago has been largely smothered in tinsel and artificial snow.

Bethlehem at Christmas is more likely to conjure up children and peace, gift-giving and joviality, rather than some of the oldest carols still sung that link Christ on His Calvary cross with the child in a manger.

Western societies have gradually been easing Christ out of Christmas, ending up with an X-marks-the-spot mass, or the even more anodyne "season". The early Christians who renamed an existing Roman sun festival at least had good reasons for changing the name. Christ was born on Christmas Day.

It seems more and more ordinary Hong Kong people are feeling the pinch, feeling anxious, even depressed, frustrated and angry, as we approach Christmas 2001.

Yet we still have the cheering lights and decorations, Christmas ads and promotions, endless "seasonal" muzak in the shops, gift-wrapping, and the parties. It is all quite commercial, of course, encouraging consumerism, and not a little sentiment and nostalgia – which in small doses is harmless.

Yet, some things remain the same.

Even people for whom Christmas has no religious significance look for something positive from this celebration.

What hope or comfort does Christmas have this year? What does it mean? Perhaps not much, despite our sentimentality about it. Or perhaps something very different from our expectations.

A committed Christian woman once said Christmas scared her because "if it's true that God Himself had to

Bethlehem revisited

come to save us, we must be in a very desperate situation indeed."

Hope can only start when you know your need. The Christmas hope is about vast needs for humanity rather than our ordinary hopes and wishes. So, paradoxically, maybe this year people are more open to Bethlehem's message. Good people all, caught up in an uncertain world.

The Christmas story in the Bible contrasts with the prevalent values and culture of the Roman Empire, then the dominant power throughout Europe and the Middle East.

Humanity's saviour is not an omnipotent emperor, but a child in a manger, the peace proclaimed is not that of an empire which dominates all its enemies, and the glory is not Rome. The wealth and prosperity of the empire is not even mentioned: there was no power, prosperity, pomp or stability in Bethlehem. Not Rome, nor even Jerusalem, is Royal David's city.

September's terrorist atrocities and subsequent economic volatility have brought a new awareness of some of

the world's commonest experiences: vulnerability, fear, powerlessness, uncertainty, suffering, poverty, hunger, homelessness.

Sharing grief and anxieties, feeling the values of friendship and relationship has brought people together in ways that the so-called good times had masked.

People becoming conscious of each other and of each other's needs, more aware of one another's aspirations and of shared humanity: maybe these are the more valuable gifts to be given and received this Christmas time.

You will not find them on sale in department stores. To see what Bethlehem is about, you have to fall on your knees or, perhaps as it has happened this year, be brought to your knees. The Bethlehem of today's geopolitics has, ironically, brought us back to think again of the hope and joy declared in the Bethlehem of 2,000 years ago.

And because we feel our vulnerability so intensely, it is joy to the world.

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