



Catholic Diocese of Victoria

Office of the Bishop

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Christmas 2023

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

"I'll be home for Christmas..." This familiar Christmas song, first recorded in 1943, is written from the point of view of a soldier stationed overseas during World War II. Its lyrics express a strong sentiment of hopeful longing amidst the misery of shattered peace and global destruction.

These heartfelt thoughts, so often in our human hearts, are also at the very heart of God. God's deepest longing is to be with us; as some translations of John 1:14 say, *"The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us"*. In a beautiful way, today's Church uses this tent image as part of our Synodal journey, inviting us to *"Enlarge the site of your tent"* (Isaiah 54:2), so that all may find a home.

At Christmas time, our thoughts of Jesus laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn strike deeply in a peculiar way at our hearts. Perhaps it causes a longing for that simplicity of life. Or perhaps it stirs up some finger-pointing indignation that our Saviour had such a mean beginning - "I surely would have offered a better place for the Holy Family if they showed up at my door!". Yes, there was no place at the inn.

The Saviour is born and God pitches God's tent at an inconvenient time! A great light breaks in to the darkness and gloom that covers the earth. A chorus of angels announces news of great joy to the shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night. A hopeful joy comes to a little family, as in Bethlehem Mary *"gave birth to her firstborn son"* (Luke 2:7).

The song "I'll Be Home for Christmas" ends with the line: *"If only in my dreams"*, a sentiment of impossibilities relegated to a dream. But the arrival of Jesus is not a dream or wishful thought. Jesus' closeness and real presence is the heart of our faith, celebrated in our Sacramental liturgy. Jesus' birth, a Saviour born for us, is our joy this Christmas season and inaugurates God's kingdom of justice and peace.

This Christmas we can pray for peace and health for the millions who have no place to come home to because their communities have been destroyed by war. Or for the 114 million¹ who are forcibly displaced by fire, floods, drought, persecution, or indifference fueled by greed.

May the same Holy Spirit who overshadowed Mary, making her womb the home of the Son of God, overshadow us too so we may welcome the Saviour. When there is room in our lives for the birth of the Saviour, our own poor fragile vulnerability will find the courage to welcome home all those in need, and we will be participants, not in a dream, but in the closeness of Emmanuel - God with us.

This Christmas, I echo the song of Zechariah: *"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"* (Luke 1:78-79). May this Christmas be a grace-filled time for you and your family to ponder anew the reality and closeness of God whose face is mercy and whose bed is a manger, and who guides our feet under the standard of a cross to the way of new life in the peace of our saviour the Risen Christ.

Blessings and heartfelt peace to you and your family for a very Holy Christmas.

Most Reverend Gary Gordon
Bishop of Victoria

¹Message of the Holy Father Francis to the participants in the second "Global Refugee Forum", December 14, 2023