

When we think of Bethlehem on that holy night  
We see the crib and know more surely  
God's closeness to us, intimate, human;  
Angels and shepherds, Mary and Joseph, all these  
are mostly what we see.  
So we should: these are the better part;  
They represent what God is doing.

But other things are also part of the story;  
harsher things that contrast with the love revealed that night.  
There being no room at the inn was an ominous start,  
but it didn't end there.  
No sooner had the Son of God entered human history  
than a local king sent spies out to learn when he was born,  
then soldiers to exterminate him, and just to be sure,  
anyone else that might have been him.

A child whom prophets had called "King" and "Prince of Peace"  
was a threat, Herod thought, to his own kingdom; to national security.  
Remarkably national security eventually was the reason  
for his execution 33 years later. One of the chief priests said at the time  
"it's better for one man to die - than for the Romans to come and crush us all."  
Others might have said: one thing is national security,  
another is self-interest.

Two thousand years later, there is still a harsh contrast between  
what the crib reveals  
and the social and political contexts in which we now celebrate his birth.  
Context mattered then, and matters now; Christmas doesn't happen in a vacuum.

In Australia recently, the Australian Border Force, whose role is counter-terrorism  
banned the long-standing practice of the Brigidine Sisters  
of taking children from the Melbourne Detention Centre for picnics in the country.  
The Sisters said it was "essential for the children to experience some normality,  
away from people who are constantly scared, anxious and depressed."  
So, let the children experience the sights and sounds of the countryside.  
The Border Force said it would arrange excursions for them.  
That's not as bad as Herod sending his soldiers to arrange  
picnics for the mothers and surviving children of Bethlehem;  
but it's still detention, and it's still holy innocents.

St Joseph decided to flee, and get his family to safety.  
We think of those today who are also desperate to flee,  
but are spending this Christmas in camps for refugees,  
some because there was no room  
in countries to whom they went for help.

Just as well, Joseph, you didn't have to pass through Australian waters;  
you might have found yourselves dumped on remote islands in the Pacific;  
for very good reasons, of course.

Is it really so hard to distinguish between national security and national self-interest?  
Is it true there is no room?

Yes, of course I have oversimplified the political complexities;  
correct procedures and quota systems all have their proper place.  
So did the Sabbath day – its very important place – until it got in the way  
of compassion.

Just as well, Joseph, you didn't have to pass through New Zealand;  
we recently deported a mother and son back to Pakistan  
even after the government's own tribunal acknowledged they were in danger from the Taliban.  
It said they could change their address; relocate to Karachi;  
- and live there, looking over their shoulders for the rest of their lives. - -

Just as well, Joseph, you were self-employed.  
Our Labour Department recently uncovered in four key industries  
widespread fraud and exploitation of vulnerable workers  
- migrants (like yourself) and young workers (like Jesus) -  
these being the ones who could not speak up for fear of losing their jobs,  
and so they were being callously under-paid.

Back in your homeland, Joseph, a wall now divides the holy city  
disrupting the ordinary lives of Palestinians,  
breaking up families, preventing work opportunities...  
all in the name of national security, though some would say:  
to provoke reactions, giving excuse for further incursions  
and new settlements on Palestinian land.

Commemorating Christmas involves more than carols, candles and cake;  
God entered our human situation in all its harshness.  
For our sakes Jesus knew what it was like  
to be vulnerable, to be a refugee, and to be executed.  
But this throws into even greater relief the love revealed in that birth,  
because evil's kick-back is the price love was willing to pay

for reaching deep into the recesses of human life and human history,  
and transforming it from within.

Such love was never owed to us, or deserved,  
but simply, unconditionally, given.

The sheer bigness of God's love and the scale of God's plan  
can make our fears, anxieties and failures disappear out of sight.

Rightly, we adore with the shepherds and sing with the angels.  
But it doesn't stop there. Being his associates commits us  
to confronting evil and building peace,  
by being channels of love that is not owed, or deserved, or carefully measured.