

ACT Region's Christmas Service - 2016

The festival of Christmas celebrates the glorious advent of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, on this earth about two millennia ago. Born in Bethlehem, He rose from humble beginnings to become a World Teacher. His message of Love and Compassion inspires millions of followers all over the world today. The Christmas season is marked with festivities and rejoicing at the wonderful gift that God bestowed on mankind in the form of His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

ACT Region marked the Christmas season with a Christmas Service on Sunday, 11 December 2016 between 10 am and 12 noon at the Erindale Neighbourhood Centre, a charming venue owned by the ACT Government and managed by the Tuggeranong Uniting Church.

The altar had a Christmas theme featuring the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to signify 'Divine Love'. Love has always been associated with the heart; so it was only natural that God's Love was represented by a heart, the heart of his Son Jesus. In Him, God the Father revealed His infinite love for all of us. Also, by the side of the altar was a beautifully decorated Christmas tree with ornaments signifying the many facets of Christmas. For example, an angel representing the angel that told the shepherds of the birth of the King, tinsel representing the little sparks of fire that Joseph made to keep Mary and Jesus warm and silver and gold coloured ornaments representing the rich blessings of Jesus. Meanwhile, the Candles and gifts underneath the tree represented Jesus as a Divine Light that every Christian should follow, the same light that led the Three Wise Men with the gifts representing those given by the wise men when they arrived at the nativity scene as well as to remind us that the Lord gave us the gift of Jesus on His birth (Christmas).

The program began with Nanda, President, Sai Young Adults of the ACT Region and the Master of Ceremonies for the day welcoming 50 guests from various faith groups to the Christmas Service. Next, Nanda introduced our special guest, Sue Miller, Senior Minister, North Side Life Church. Sue is a retired social worker and sits on a number of committees such as the ACT Branch of Spiritual Care Australia and ACT Pastoral Care Council. Sue loves her interaction and believes that kindness matters and that every human being deserves respect regardless of their responsive interaction.

Sue skilfully outlined the reason behind the Christmas celebrations using scripture readings from the Bible. Sue later explained how the first recreation of the nativity scene came into being.

According to Sue, St. Francis was responsible for this. He was disgusted with the greed and materialism that was rampant in Italy at that time. St Francis felt that people had forgotten that Jesus came to us not as a rich king but as a poor child.

On Christmas Eve of 1223, St Francis gathered all of his religious brothers from the places where they served and together with the people from the town and the hillsides. He then led them to the place where he had worked to set up his first humble live nativity scene. The people were delighted by this simple scene lit only by the stars above and the lanterns and candles they carried. They celebrated Mass there and St. Francis preached to them, reminding them of how poor and simple the Christ's birth truly was. Just as St. Francis intended, when the people looked at animals and the humbleness of the nativity scene, they were reminded that if God did not provide a fancy birth for His Son, surely they did not need all of the fancy, new and expensive things that they often associated with Christmas or thought that they should have.

Sue went on to say that today, it is a common tradition to set nativity scenes during the Christmas season and displayed her own creation near the Christmas tree for all to take a look. She concluded her talk with the following prayer of peace by St Francis:

"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love".

Following Sue's talk, Venkat Iyar, President of Tuggeranong Sai Centre read from Sathya Sai's Christmas discourse in 1972.

Next, all those present sang in unison Christmas carols capturing the spirit of Christmas. The carols ranged from "The Little Drummer Boy", and "Let there be Love" to other popular ones like "Silent Night" "Jingle Bells" and "We wish you a Merry Christmas". The beautiful carols with excellent musical accompaniment gladdened the hearts of all present.

Following the carol singing, Dr Prema, ACT Region's President of Sathya Sai International Organisation Australia and PNG thanked our special guest Sue Miller for taking the time to attend the Christmas Service. Dr Prema also thanked all those who attended the Service. She also reminded all that in order to exemplify the teachings of Jesus, during the Christmas season, a service activity of singing carols would be undertaken at IRT Kangara Waters Nursing Home, on 17 December 2016. She concluded her talk by quoting Sathya Sai's admonishment,: "Let the different faiths exist, let them flourish and let the Glory of God be sung in all the languages, and in a variety of tunes. That should be the ideal. Respect the differences between the faiths and recognize them as valid as long as they do not extinguish the flames of unity..."

The program concluded with the distribution of gifts to the children who attended the service and the serving of light refreshments to all the guests. The light refreshments again had a Christmas theme with a number of Christmas goodies including a Christmas cake with words "unity is divinity.".

It was a very moving morning with the Christmas Service touching the hearts and souls of everyone present.