



### Freezing church, but hope renewed

I'm not a great fan of Christmas; too many anomalies. I mean, who's it all about really, Jesus or Santa Claus? And why all the Christmas paraphernalia when Jesus was born in the peace and quiet of a stable? And why get carried away with the snowy scenes and twinkly lights when Christmas time in Australia it's 35 degrees in the shade?

So what does an old misery like me do when invited to a Christmas concert because his 10 year old granddaughter is singing in the choir? My heart sank. All the usual soppy songs, I thought, and we'll probably be asked to sing along too, which I dread, because I'm not a great fan of singing either. They were singing in a church the size of a small cathedral too, and I'm not a fan of big churches. It was bound to be freezing cold with pews that felt like granite.

It was not an evening I was looking forward to, therefore. But there I sat in the freezing cold on the granite pew, staring at a stained glass window I couldn't figure out, when in walked the choir - singing as they entered. My head spun, because there was my 10 year old granddaughter looking like she was 18, and the choir of kids sounded twice times terrific. The conductor, an 83 year old Dutchman, entered with a walker, looking terribly frail, but I wasn't fooled one bit, because I'd heard how he'd hammered that choir into shape, no nonsense accepted.

He sat in a chair, raised his baton, and whoosh the choir burst into song with ***O Come, O Come Immanuel***. "Oh no," I cried to myself, "please no, not that carol," because it's the one carol that gets to me. I was instantly a blubbery mess.

It took some serious British restraint on my part to hold myself back from standing up and yelling, "O God, how you love Israel," because that's what gets to me in that carol, it's God's love for Israel. Because if he can put up with Israel, there's hope for everyone - hope for my 10 year old granddaughter up there singing her heart out, but already facing the fearsome gauntlet of bullying at school, hope for my army son-in-law sitting next to me who did two stints in Afghanistan that left him a shattered shell of his old self, hope for my daughter who's had a horrible year with another granddaughter of ours nearly managing to kill herself, twice, and hope for all those people going through the motions at Christmas time who have no idea why Jesus was born, and their lives of depression and anxiety next year will be proof of it.

It is Jesus' love for his beloved Israel, the Israel he came to, felt deep compassion for, wept over, and wanted to cover with his wings like a hen covers her chicks that gives me my hope, because if he could still love them despite what they did to him, then can I not apply his love for Israel to everyone else as well?

And that's exactly how Simeon felt too, because on seeing Jesus in the temple he yelled out as I nearly yelled out from my granite seat in that freezing church, "O God, how you love Israel." But in that same sentence he included "the Gentiles" too. Simeon knew that God's love for Israel was in fact the demonstration of his love for everyone. And suddenly, that all came to life again for me.

A freezing church, then, but hope thoroughly renewed.

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