

LOCAL PRIESTHOOD LEADER MESSAGE

The True Spirit of Christmas

By President Andre C. Bester

President, South Africa Missionary Training Centre

“As a family we felt we needed much more of a focus on the Saviour and started a tradition of having a special family home evening on Christmas Day—inviting the extended family into our home.”

Christmas was a very exciting time for my brothers and me! Our parents would take us to see the decorative lights in Cape Town, which were always very impressive; there was always a Primary party celebrating Christmas and the birth of the Saviour—and our schools closed over the “Festive Season,” YEAH!

For weeks we would construct a letter to Father Christmas. We would write and rewrite the letter every time we saw something in the shops that we wanted. We would each state that we had been good boys and really needed the item we had put down for him to bring. We would give Dad the letter to mail, addressed to



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“Father Christmas, North Pole.” My dad worked in the post office, so we thought that if he posted it, it would get there much sooner.

We were chased to bed early on Christmas Eve as ‘Father Christmas will not visit us with presents,’ Mom said, if we were still awake. But first, we had to put out something for him to drink and eat. It was amazing to me how there were no presents under the tree when we went to bed but when we awoke, the presents had magically appeared and of course, Mom and Dad knew nothing about it.

Over the years, I have seen a tremendous increase in the commercialization of Christmas. In the world, it has become a time to party and to indulge. It has become a time for an increase in accidents resulting in death and broken families. For some, Christmas has become a time of tragedy and not celebration.

In spite of the commercialization of Christmas, the Spirit of Christmas—which is the Spirit of Christ—still appears to be alive amongst many Christians. They appear to have an appreciation of the importance of the birth of the Saviour as well as an appreciation for the purpose of His death, though the deeper meaning



The Nativity

and consequences do not appear to be understood. I have been amazed at how the Spirit of Christmas affects people. I see more generosity, kindness, and love expressed during this time than any other time of the year. As with others, my thoughts turn to my family in greater abundance during this time and my desire is for them to also feel the Spirit of Christmas.

I have come to realize that in my early life, in my mind, Christmas was all about me. Today it is more about others and family. Traditionally we have always gathered together as a family at our home over Christmas and enjoyed a braai, together with salads, ice cream, cool drinks, and a swim. Those were great days for us. My nieces and nephews still remember those days with fondness.

As a family we felt we needed much more of a focus on the Saviour and started a tradition of having a special family home evening on Christmas Day—inviting the extended family into our home. We gather early and enjoy singing carols and listening to some talks from assigned family members after reading the Christmas story. They have become very special experiences for us as the Spirit has been present in great abundance. Those of our family who now reside elsewhere and are unable to attend still mention how they miss those times.

In my older years and as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I have come to understand more clearly the great significance of the birth of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Without His birth, there is no Resurrection. Without His Resurrection, no plan of salvation. Without the plan of salvation, we would be under the influence of Satan forever and ever and would not be able to get back to the presence of our Father, for we would not have a resurrected body.

When we think of the Saviour's miraculous birth, we cannot help but think of His miraculous Resurrection, which was preceded by an inhuman amount of suffering for our sins and anxieties, which caused Him, even God, to bleed at every pore. As we think of the mission that He served, how He taught, and how He had to suffer through His mission in order to teach His doctrine—which doctrine is to come unto Him through faith in Him, repentance, baptism by immersion, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end—we learn of His great love for us.

In Moses 1:39 we are taught that it is His work and His glory to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man. Furthermore, we are taught that part of our responsibility as members of His Church is to help the Saviour bring this to pass. This we can do by

sharing the gospel with those with whom we come into contact and by living the same way that He did. That means we would speak the words that He would speak, do the things that He would do, go to places that He would go to, and serve our fellowmen as He would do. We would lift up the arms that hang down, strengthen the feeble knees, mourn with those who mourn, and comfort those who stand in need of comfort. Said another way, we should live the principles of ministering as announced by our prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, at general conference in April 2018. Our real joy will come when we make the Saviour the focus of the season and the focus of our celebrations. As we do this, He will shower His tender mercies upon us. He has invited us to come to Him in so many ways. He has said, “Come follow me” (Luke 18:22), “learn of me” (Matthew 11:29), “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), “I have set an example for you” (3 Nephi 18:16), and “[be] even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27). My experience is that as we take time to ponder our lives and what that life is with the Saviour in it, we will see what He means to us and our love for Him will grow. The Saviour said, “Be still and know that I am God” (Doctrine and Covenants 101:16)

I am so grateful for the Lord Jesus Christ. He lived for us and He died

for us. He is now resurrected and stands at the right hand of our Father. I know that He is in every detail of our lives. He has given us so much. May we will give Him all that He

asks, which is a broken heart and a contrite spirit. ■

President Andre C. Bester was called as president of the South Africa Missionary Training Centre in January 2018. He is married to Joy Elizabeth Lomax; they are the parents of five children.

Christmas Gifts of Love and Forgiveness

By President Colin H. Bricknell

President, Johannesburg South Africa Temple

President Colin H. Bricknell



“As we prayerfully contemplate the Christmas gifts that we would like to give to our family and friends at this time, there may be some to whom we should rather consider giving lasting gifts that do not cost money—and that do not need expensive wrapping and ribbons.”

Christmas Eve was always a fun time with our family, and among our family traditions, our children would enact the Christmas story during their younger years. They dressed up as Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, some of the animals, the three Wise Men, and the angels. It was a fun activity which allowed us as a family to focus on the real reason for the season, and that is to celebrate the birth of our Saviour and Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

When Christmas morning arrived, the children were normally the first to wake up. They would scurry around the Christmas tree to see what gifts

had been left there for them. Great excitement, laughter, joy, and happiness abounded as they opened their presents—one by one—with smiles beaming from ear to ear. These were very happy and loving times that I remember with fondness as our children have grown up.

As I think of the gifts that we normally give and receive at Christmas, my thoughts turn to the first material gifts associated with our Saviour Jesus Christ, which are reflected scripturally in Matthew 2:10–11, “When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come

into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.”

The giving and receiving of gifts at Christmas time is meant to remind all of us of the Magi’s gifts to Christ on the occasion of His birth.

However, nowadays, with the commercialization of Christmas, it is unfortunate that Christ is often left out of Christmas and our focus is then placed on the gift and not the giver of the gift. Perhaps we take the gifts that we receive from our loved ones for granted and we run the risk of becoming more materialistic in our expectations. And then on top of it all, the material gifts that we buy and give to children sometimes do not last that long anyway—and are often discarded in the trash bin before the day is over.

In a very real spiritual sense, the greatest gift that we have received from Heavenly Father is the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ, whose sacred Atonement was the supreme act of love and forgiveness.

Perhaps as we prayerfully contemplate the Christmas gifts that we would like to give to our family and friends at this time, there may be some to whom we should rather consider giving lasting gifts that do not cost



“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh”.

money—and that do not need expensive wrapping and ribbons. All they need is the gift of our love, the gift of our tolerance, the gift of our heart, the gift of our understanding them, the gift of our charity, the gift of our good example, the gift of our kindness, the gift of our generosity, the gift of our speaking good of them, the gift of us being more patient with them, the gift of not holding grudges, the gift of our time, the gift of selfless service with us lifting them up, the gift of our friendship, the gift of our caring, and the gift of our forgiveness to them. These

are what I call “good and perfect gifts” as mentioned in James 1:17, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.”

There are many families and individuals out there in the world that will not be having a happy and joyous Christmas this year because of a lack of love and forgiveness from a spouse, family member, or friend. The Saviour said: “Wherefore, I say unto you, that ye ought to forgive one another; for he that forgiveth not his brother

his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord; for there remaineth in him the greater sin” (Doctrine and Covenants 64:9) He also said, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matthew 22:37) and “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (verse 39).

What better time would there be for us to give the gift of love and forgiveness to one who has wronged us than at Christmastime? What better time would there be for us to help heal a family with love and forgiveness, than at Christmastime—when it is so badly needed?

We must also remember that when we love and forgive others, we forgive them for the wrong that they did to us. We do not have the capacity or the ability to forgive them of their sins—only our Father in Heaven and the Saviour can do this. So, our forgiveness does not absolve the need for them to repent and to seek forgiveness from Father in Heaven, and for their bishop to help them through this process if the transgression is serious.

President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) reminded us of the following: “The cure for most marital troubles does not lie in divorce. It lies in repentance and forgiveness, in expressions of kindness and concern” (“The Women in Our Lives”, *Liahona*, Nov. 2004, 84).

In Matthew 5:43–44 we read the following: “Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy, But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.”

This is probably one of the toughest commandments which our Saviour has given to each of us to live, and it is all about love and forgiveness!

To love and forgive someone who has hurt you deeply will probably be one of the hardest things you will ever do. The freedom that you will feel when you finally forgive will be worth all the pain and effort it requires. This love and forgiveness can only come with the help of the Lord.

It was Ghandi who said: “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.”

The story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 is also a wonderful example of repentance from wrongdoing, forgiveness, love, and mercy, as the father welcomed home his son who was lost but was found again—he who was dead is made alive. The miracle of love and forgiveness!

Our spiritual capacity and ability to love and forgive others, no matter what wrongs they have caused us, will be powerfully magnified as we increase our love for and attendance

in the Lord’s holy house. It is in the temple where we receive personal revelation and strength from the Holy Spirit. It is in the temple where we are ministered to by the Lord. It is in the temple where we can become more like Him. It is in the temple where we can learn to love. It is in the temple where we can learn to forgive!

It was our Saviour Jesus Christ, whilst spending His last hours on this earth, who uttered those humble and powerful words of love and forgiveness on the cross at Calvary, that you

and I will never forget: “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

As we celebrate the birth of our Saviour, let our focus be on Him, and may we pattern our lives after His. Let us also remember that Jesus Christ gave us the Atonement—the greatest of all gifts and of all giving!

May we love like He loves. May we forgive like He forgives. ■

President Colin H. Bricknell was called as president of the Johannesburg South Africa Temple in November 2016. He is married to Elizabeth Fitchet, who serves as matron of the temple; they are the parents of five children.

SELF-RELIANCE SERIES

Homeless, Destitute and Alone: Lessons Learned along the Way

By T. Ruth Randall

“The gospel of Jesus Christ can change us fundamentally, and that is what helps us change our circumstances.”

When Etienne Marakavi arrived in South Africa at the age of 25, he had no family, no home, and very little money.

Having lost his parents and survived many civil war atrocities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, he left the country by himself on foot. At 19 years old, he began an epic

journey, travelling from country to country in pursuit of a new home. He stayed in refugee camps along the way, relying on donated food and shelter to survive.

Eventually, Etienne found himself in Norway. There, he had the life-changing experience of meeting the missionaries and joining The Church

of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But a fruitless attempt to gain asylum status meant that after some time, he was forced to leave. “I went to Rwanda, Uganda, and then Kenya,” said Etienne, “where I was advised to leave the country. Then I moved to Tanzania, where I was told the country does not accept asylum seekers. I moved to Malawi, where I unsuccessfully tried to apply for asylum, and I had to leave due to the harsh conditions of life. I managed to slip through Mozambique, where I got mugged and robbed.” He made it to Tongogara, a refugee camp in Zimbabwe. But the conditions in the camp were extremely harsh and “hopeless,” said Etienne, so he left again—this time bound for South African shores.

Because he had found the Church, he had something he didn’t previously: a testimony. But his temporal circumstances were dire.

“I had every expectation of being homeless for several years,” says Etienne.

And in the beginning, he was. He joined a group of homeless people on the streets of a small border town called Musina and lived on discarded food to stay alive.

But some months later he managed to travel to Johannesburg. There, he gradually started finding menial jobs. Now, a few years later, he pays his

own rent, has completed his high-school certificate, recently finished the Church-sponsored distance-learning “Pathway” programme, and is now registered with BYU–Idaho to earn a degree in computer science. He has also remained active and faithful in

the Church, currently serving as the ward assistant clerk.

Etienne shares the three biggest things he learned about self-reliance in this extraordinary journey, and his answers show an understanding that self-reliance permeates every



part of our lives. “People should not confuse the topic of self-reliance with self-sufficiency,” he says. “I firmly believe that self-reliance involves both spiritual and temporal aspects of people’s lives.”

His three personal lessons are:

1. Develop faith and practice faithful habits

“What I first learned about the principle of self-reliance is to always rely on the Lord through the basic routines such as morning prayers and daily scripture studies while I am trying to achieve the goals that I set out,” says Etienne. “Self-reliance in this case means to have faith in the Lord and at that time I am exercising the free agency that the Lord bestowed upon me.”

Carrying out the daily habits of prayer and scripture reading takes discipline. And discipline takes work.

The *Church Handbook of Instructions* reminds us that work is fundamental to any kind of self-reliance and that it is the foundation of joy: “To become self-reliant, a person must work”, it reads. “Work is physical, mental, or spiritual effort. It is a basic source of happiness, self-worth, and prosperity. Through work, people accomplish many good things in their lives” (*Church Handbook of Instructions, Book 2: Priesthood and Auxiliary Leaders* [1998], 257).

2. Look for help in developing skills, not handouts

“The second thing I learned is the ability to seek help that will impact your life positively in the long run both temporally and spiritually,” says Etienne. “In other words, you better learn to ask people to teach you how to fish, rather than constantly asking people to give you the fish.”

When he first arrived in South Africa, Etienne remembers the struggle of meeting basic financial obligations. “It was really very difficult,” he said. But as he battled through these challenges and asked for help when he needed it, he always kept in mind his end goal: “finding a job so that I could take care of myself.”

3. Look for ways to help others build up their own strength

“The third thing that I learned about self-reliance is the ability to help others to become in their turn self-reliant,” says Etienne. “We all are gifted in one way or another, and we can use our gifts to help and bless others so that they too, in their turn, can even help many more. By empowering our fellow beings, we learn and enrich our lives in the process.”

Etienne’s life is living proof of how the gospel of Jesus Christ can change us fundamentally, and that this is what helps us change our

circumstances. President Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994) put it this way: “The world would take people out of the slums. Christ takes the slums out of people, and then they take themselves out of the slums. The world would mold men by changing their environment. Christ changes men, who then change their environment. The world would shape human behavior, but Christ can change human nature” (“Born of God,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1985, 6).

Above all, Etienne’s faith in the Lord helps him maintain perspective through the tough times. “I think my trials are small compared to what Joseph Smith and the early Church pioneers went through,” he says. “In the trying moments, I always try to remember the words that God told the Prophet Joseph Smith while he was in Liberty Jail, as recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 122:

“If thou art called to pass through tribulation; if thou art in perils among false brethren; if thou art in perils among robbers; if thou art in perils by land or by sea; . . .

“. . . And above all, if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good. . . .

“. . . Therefore, fear not what man can do, for God shall be with you forever and ever” (verses 5, 7, 9). ■



President Samuel Martin
Circa 1926

Missionaries in front of the
Mowbray "Cumorah" Chapel in Cape Town circa 1922
Courtesy Church History Library

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH IN AFRICA SERIES

History of the Church in Africa: Did You Know?

By Africa Southeast Area Church History Department

How was the first LDS chapel in Africa funded?

Today the Church is in 37 African countries with many Church-owned places of worship. These chapels are constructed with funds from the headquarters of the Church. This is the story of how the first LDS chapel was acquired.

When missionaries returned to Africa on October 16, 1904, Samuel Martin was the first to be baptized in Cape Town. He had been born in England. In Cape Town he owned a bakery. Like all early Saints, he longed to join with the Saints in Utah. He shared that desire

with the mission president. The mission president promised Brother Samuel that if he would pay his tithing faithfully, he and his family would be able to emigrate to Zion. Having faith, Brother Martin negotiated the sale of his business, which provided more than sufficient funds for the family's future. The Martins moved to Utah—only to return to South Africa when Samuel himself was called to serve as mission president from April 1926 through 1929.

And what of the promise made to Samuel about tithing? Tithing contributed from the sale of his business provided funds which were used by the

Church to purchase a mission home—which became known as “Cumorah”—and which was the first Church-owned property on the African continent. The building served many years as the mission home, later became a chapel, and was rebuilt in 1937. Today the Mowbray Chapel sits on that same property at the corner of Main and Grove Road in Cape Town.

Samuel Martin will always be remembered for his generosity and for his faithful payment of tithing. Indeed tithing is a principle with a promise. ■

Source: Evan P. Wright; *A History of South African Mission Period I, 1903–1944*