

Article for Australian Christian  
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Tis the season ...

Living in Vienna has made us much more aware of the seasons. The weather has distinct cut-off points when trees turn gold, snow begins to fall, or later spring flowers appear. People follow the seasons too. There is a leather-jacket season, a pumpkin season, a season for grape juice before the new wine comes. There seems less need here for advertising and banners to tell us Advent is upon us. We have the snow already on the ground, and Christmas markets in every town square.

These are traditions that extend back into antiquity. And they have the effect of bringing the past closer to the present. In Australia, we live with an Aboriginal history of true vastness, and a European history of extreme briefness. History is either so far in the past that we cannot access it, or so short that we have no sense of really how recent it is. In Australia we seem to have made a clear distinction between history and the present day. History is something for Aboriginal culture, or the National Trust. Its bearing on our present is inconsequential. Here in Europe history is all around us. Very close. And still living and shaping our world, attitudes, our lives.

Around the corner from my office is an apartment in which Ludwig van Beethoven completed the 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony, from which we get the wonderful “Hymn of Joy” – number 35 in our hymn book. The apartment block is still there, and looks the same as it must have almost two hundred years ago. Someone lives in Beethoven’s flat and doubtless doesn’t give it a passing thought.

Many Austrians talk about the Austrian-Hungarian empire of the Hapsburg family as if its absence since the end of World War 1 is just a temporary democratic inconvenience. In Sarajevo, Bosnia you can see the place where that war started. It’s a block from the present World Vision office. World Vision staff pass over the spot on the way to lunch.

Not too far from Vienna, if poorly sign-posted, is a concentration camp from the second World War. The murder of millions of jews, homosexuals, communists, and mentally ill people, is just a blink of an eye in the past. Even this past month, the Nazi world echoed strongly around Austria amidst the electioneering.

In some ways this is a good thing. It is sobering to realise how fragile society is. How quickly “things fall apart. The centre cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” (W.B. Yeats). It is thin ice between peace and violence.

When we talk to friends and relatives back home in Australia, we urge them to take seriously the violent and divisive forces within society. It is a short step from banning boat

people to racist rhetoric to full scale violence. European history, including the present day history in the Balkans, in Chechnya, in the Middle East, shows this to be horribly true.

Just before Christmas I shall be in Jerusalem again. I was there a few months ago. History is close there too. At every turn there is another “sacred site.” I have visited most of them. At first I was bothered about feeling so little for the experience. Interesting. Worth doing. But not a high spiritual moment.

This is because my time working among the poor and oppressed in Eastern Europe and the Middle East teaches me that, unlike humans, God is not a product of history. Indeed, history is **not** His-story. History is mere human history. Jesus came to earth to sweep aside human constructions. To demolish mere materialism. To obliterate hierarchy and politics. Instead he came to be present in an eternal way – beyond history. And for us to be fully present with Him.

You don't need to go somewhere to discover the meaning of Jesus Christ. The only place we need to go, is to Him.

Merry Christmas.