CHRISTMAS smiles on many, but not all. The joy and peace of Christmas are experienced by some, but not all. I was one of the fortunate ones. We are enjoying Christmas and New Year in Bologna, Italy. And we have our family with us. Which makes us luckier still.

Bologna is a delightful city. One obvious reason is that it escaped the attention of 20th-century architects and planners. Damage from World War II bombings, by the Allies, is visible here and there. But the repairs were done with sympathy for this medieval, human-scaled city. And, fortunately, Bologna was spared the concrete nonsense and motorway brutality that permanently scar heavy-industrialized British and German cities like Birmingham and Dresden.

Bologna is a city in which you walk or catch a bus, here you cannot be banned from its inner parts. But even if you do, the decade of the 1970s would not force you to the side walk just so you could be part of the parade along the wide porticoes that line every thoroughfare, and so you can wander up narrow lanes and across cobblestone bridges. Glimpse the renaissance churches and proud civic buildings, one after another; past perfect, a functioning present, a certain future.

You need not be greedy, you need only to shed the calories from every meal, for Bologna has remained Italy's best eating city. Shops and offices close early, and workers can eat and rest. By 4pm city streets reful. Being out in the evening, mid-week and all, cold or hot, shopping, eating, walking, watching, talking, smoking, is normal, expected even.

Across town you bump into students walking and cycling as well, for this is the world's oldest university town, older than Oxford or Cambridge in England, and the bigger Bologna University houses 123 faculties and 961 libraries, and hosts 100,000 students. It's a bit like the whole world as you'll see it. And as you pass the students, over this century with energy and purpose, and buying power and fun.

Not accidentally, for this is a clever, Bologna inspires great industrial designers like Dino Gavina, leader of Italy's reputation for stylish furniture, and for a remarkable succession of elite motorizing companies: Mascerati, Lamborghini and Duci.

No prizes for guessing, then, that Bologna is regarded widely as Italy's most livable city and capital of one of Europe's most successful regional economies. Its unemployment rate is low. Its incomes are high. It is charmingly authentic, human-scaled, productive, sustainable and clever.

As much as it is a lemon to the Western world as we start the second decade of the 21st century. Ten years ago, amid froth and fireworks, we set forth confidently into a new millennium. By September 2008, the global economy was in crisis. Accounts of the eviction of mortgage defaulters and pictures of rows of empty newly-built houses became nightly news. The fully running economies on easy finance was exposed. Greedy banks and investment funds required expensive government bailouts. Stalled economies required expensive government rescue packages.

The US economy remains fragile. Once proud industrial cities are in permanent decline. Here in Europe financial crisis threatens the dream of unity and a shared prosperous future. Ireland, Greece and Spain struggle for years to pay down public debt and find a way to build competitive economies. New millennium optimism has been replaced by the age of austerity. Australia, though, is lucky. Good fortune - rich minerals, our nearby Asia location, our separation from the rest of Europe and North America - has smiled on us.

But in a new decade we will need more. Fortunately, the recipe for economic success has never been clearer; so long as we learn from the experiences of the past decade and resist the temptations of get-rich quick schemes peddled by the purveyors of magic; oil, the white shoe wearers, offering cheap finance, easy gain, get it now, in quick, off the plan, a guaranteed investment, blah, blah, blah.

Now, more than ever, Australia enters the new decade well placed. Shared prosperity awaits us, if we are clever enough to assemble it. For now, from Italy, Buon Natale; e un Felice Anno Nuovo.

Professor Philip O'Neill is director of the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.

Silent Night in the trenches part of wonder

Peace can be ours at Christmas, writes Bruce Robertson.

THIS year I celebrated my 80th Christmas on the planet. Friends say they are amazed at how quickly this year has passed, but I've been thinking how quickly 50 years have passed. I distinctly remember my fourth Christmas, since every gift struck a chord with me and I was filled with joy, and giddying.

Not every Christmas was wonderful. The first Christmas after my parents separated was awkward. Two years later when I was 13, my father died and I felt I was empty and isolated.

In my teenage years it seemed to me that Christmas in Australia became commercially and religiously muted, and I treated it with mercenary contempt. You could say that I became Claustrophobic.

At the age of 21 something transformed my cynicism about Christmas and restored the wonder of childhood faith to my soul. I discovered a series of personal encounters the love of God expressed in the Incarnation; the humanity of Jesus Christ. And this is never seen more clearly than in the birth of Jesus as our Saviour in Bethlehem.

Canon J. John says that at Christmas 'the Invisible God became visible. The Intangible God became tangible. The Unknowable God became knowable. God became a Man'.

Since becoming a Christian, I have never lost that sense of wonder and joy and the peace of Christmas. There had always been a restless hunger for something more. At the birth of Jesus the angels sang about the promise of peace on Earth, but actually Jesus was born into a land invaded by a cruel conqueror. In becoming human, God returned to us the power of peace, the power to choose to forgive and be reconciled. Perhaps the best illustration of this took place some 16 years ago on Christmas Eve, amid the trench warfare of World War I.

One writer records that: ‘On a frosty Christmas Eve, the Germans mounted trees on their parapets and lit candles and lanterns. Thousands of British watched in fascination as the wondrous sight was joined by the distant haunting sound of men singing Silly Night (Silent Night) . . . Scottish soldiers . . . spotted Germans chattering into the open with no sign of hostile intent. They were on the Western Front, near Lille. Ruffled, they held their fire but the Germans came right up to the trench and offered cigars. It was 1914 and the near-mythical Christmas truce had begun, when men laid down their weapons, shook hands and embraced the season’s message of peace on Earth.’

So peace is really ours for the taking, and we take it by deciding not to spend our lives at war with each other. As Dwight Thompson says: ‘You can spend your life any way you want to, but you can only spend it once.’

It seems to me now that peace on Earth can be ours at Christmas when we lay down our hurt and frustration and remember to forgive, just as we have been forgiven.

Bruce Robertson is the senior minister at Globe Church, Newcastle and Eastlakes. This article is submitted by the Churches Media Association – cmahunter.com.au

Today’s fact

Global defence spending is seven times greater than education spending.

Today’s word

Ululate: howl, wail, make a howling cry.

It happened today

From our files – 1932: A considerable quantity of rock and earth crashed down from the side of the cliff yesterday below that forms the southern end of the King Edward Park drive.

Today in history

1831: Naturalist Charles Darwin sets out on a voyage to the Pacific aboard HMS Beagle. His discoveries during the voyage helped to form a new theories of evolution.

1917: First City Music Hall opens in New York City.

1943: The World Bank is created with an agreement signed by 28 nations.

1964: Netherlands transfers sovereignty to Indonesia after more than 300 years of Dutch rule.


1975: The Soviet Union takes control of Afghanistan.

1996: Rwanda’s first genocide trial opens for the 1994 slaughter of 800,000 Tutsi.

2001: President Bush personally normalizes trade relations with China; the US announces plans to hold Talibun and al-Qaeda prisoners at Guantamano Bay, Cuba.

2007: Pakistan opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, 54, is killed by an attacker.

Born today

Louis Pasteur, French scientist (+1895); Louis Bromfield, US novelist (+1956); Marlene Dietrich, German actress (+1992); Gerard Depardieu pictured, French actor (+1948; T.S. Monk, jazz drummer/vocalist (+1948).

Odd spot

A US ship with a long-term conscience sent $63.25 to a Pennsylvania food company to pay for a hammer stolen decades ago; the goods accompanied by an anonymous letter that said: ‘Enclosed is $65 to cover the hammer plus a little cash for interest. I'm sorry I stole it, but have changed my ways.’

Today’s text

And Jesus grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. Luke 2:40