

The best of times, the worst of times

PUBLISHED
19 December 2025

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Charles Dickens' novel *A Tale of Two Cities* begins with the line 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times'. It ends with the self-sacrificing death by guillotine of its main character, which encapsulates both the best and worst of times.

Dickens' story might seem a million miles away from the story of Jesus' birthday in the gospels, and certainly further away than his popular novella *A Christmas Carol*. But his opening line speaks powerfully about Christmas.

The light of the birth of Jesus must break
through heavy clouds.

This year, as in many recent years, Christmas has seemed to come at the worst of times. The news has been full of stories of hatreds and terrorism, of flood or bushfire, of conflicts in the Middle East, Myanmar and Sudan, of threats to democracy and of crime and the cruel incarceration of children. The light of the birth of Jesus must break through heavy clouds.

That, of course, is also true of the gospel stories of Jesus' infancy. For Mary, Jesus' birth couldn't have come at a worse time. In her late pregnancy, she faced a long walk into the hills and to a crowded town and a paddock in which to bear her child. In Matthew's Gospel, she had then to escape for her life into Egypt in flight from Herod's knives. And Simeon prophesies that a sword will enter Mary's own heart, too.

Nevertheless, the story of Christmas is indeed about the best of times—the birth of a child with the gift and the promise that every baby brings and, in Jesus' case, the promise of his future life, death and rising as Saviour of his own and of every time.

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good news story of God's love for us.

In the gospels, the story of Christmas, with its light and its shadow, sets the scene for a larger story: of Jesus' ministry, preaching and healing, heralding the coming kingdom of God; of his gathering of disciples and the opening of doors at the start of his ministry; of the slow closing of those doors through rejection by those most entrusted with the responsibility of accepting him, and the plotting against him of the religious leaders; of his final betrayal by his friend, abandonment by his disciples, unjust trials by Roman and Jewish authorities, torture and degradation by the soldiers, and tortured death on the cross designed to dismantle him as a person and to blot him out of memory; of darkness in the early afternoon covering the earth, only for him to rise like the sun on Easter Sunday in the decisive best of times, reckoning with the worst times and making them a memory and not the last word.

Life will be stronger than death, kindness more powerful
than brutality, and love more potent than calculation,
coldness or hatred.

Easter makes the life and death of Jesus part of a good news story of God's love for us, which is stronger than any tortures and darkness that sin can inflict. The climax of Jesus' death and rising makes his birth the best of times. It justifies the hope—not just for the infant Jesus, but for all other children—that life will be stronger than death, kindness more powerful than brutality, and love more potent than calculation, coldness or hatred.

Christmas is a time to celebrate, even when we might seem to live in the worst of times.

Source: The best of times, the worst of times - published in Melbourne Catholic 19 Dec 2025

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