

IT'S CHRISTMAS TIME AGAIN



It's Christmas time again, and everyone is talking about it. Mainly from the commercial aspect – shops going all out to sell Christmas presents to people, and so many people have to buy so many gifts for all of their families.

But sometimes you hear references to the spiritual meaning of Christmas too. They are well and truly drowned out by the commercial consumerism messages, but of all the times in the year, this (and also at Easter) is the time when people do talk a bit more about Jesus and Christianity.

Most people know Christmas has something to do with the birth of Jesus Christ, at least I think most people are aware of this, although maybe our society has become so post-Christian that young people don't have a clue.

It is the only time of the year where lots of people talk about Christ: it is part of the name “Christ-mas”- the only time people use the word “Christ” not as a swear word! Now of course we know that Christmas has pagan origins, beginning with the Roman festival of Saturnalia (17-24 December) which celebrated the winter solstice (the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere.) And it is true that no one knows when Jesus was born: most likely it wasn't the 25th of December!

But it is good, I think, to hear people openly talking about the birth of Jesus and at least making reference to that, and having some rudimentary understanding that He was God who came to earth as a little baby in Bethlehem as ‘shepherds washed their socks by night’. The birth of Jesus – God coming to earth to offer Himself as the sacrifice for our sins – is a pretty important event, surely the most important event in all of history!

So I think it is good for us to consider that amazing event in a sermon, and learn some lessons from it. And if we are trying to share our Christianity with the unbelievers in the world, this time of year is an opportunity to do so in an open way you can't do at any other time. At this time of year, we have a little crack in the door – a small opening – into the hearts and minds of people, and they might be receptive to some words about Jesus more than at any other time, because they may wonder about the real meaning behind Christmas, or the story of Christ's birth.

In 1 Corinthians 9:20 Paul said that “to the Jews I became as a Jew” etc, in order to win them over he put himself in their shoes. He didn't criticise their customs and beliefs, but tried to be accepting of them in order to use them as a springboard to tell them who the true God really is.

Acts 17:23 “For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.”

When he saw mention of God in Athens, he used it as a springboard. We can do that at Christmas. Today Paul would say – “I see you’re keeping something called Christmas on 25th December. Well, Jesus wasn’t born on December 25th, and we didn’t keep that celebration when I was around, but let me tell you about the real Jesus Christ whose birth you celebrate.”

And so if we are trying to preach the gospel to the world around us, this is a prime time of year in which to do it. Their guards are down a little, because Christ is in some way associated with Christmas. That is the reasoning behind the latest issue of “Inside Life” – “The Christmas Story: Does it still matter?” The story behind Christmas, i.e. the birth of Jesus Christ – is that relevant in the modern world? (If you want to catch a fish you have to use a hook and bait. The hook in this case is to use something they know a bit about – that Christmas has to do with Christ’s birth – and ask them to think a bit about that and how it relates to them. They think it doesn’t matter these days – so maybe this will help them think a bit more.)

Here’s something I found on the internet about this topic:

“A manger is actually a feeding trough for livestock. Do you know what a feeding trough in those days looks like? It is basically a big rectangular block of stone with the trough hewn out of it. So baby Jesus, who was wrapped in swaddling cloths, was placed in such a stone trough. Interestingly, later the Bible says that after Jesus’ crucifixion and death, Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus’ body, wrapped it in linen and laid it in a tomb hewn out of a rock (Mark 15:43-46).

There were similarities between the stones He was born in and buried in. Wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger, baby Jesus would one day be wrapped in linen and laid in a tomb. Jesus was the only child in all of humanity born to die. Once you realise that, you will realise how much God loves you. You will realise that He gave up His Son for that one purpose, and that His Son willingly came for that one purpose – to die for your sins and mine. Jesus was born to die and He lived to die, so that we might live and enjoy life abundantly today!”

There are many lessons we can learn from the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. Let’s just have a look at one verse, and analyse it.

Luke 2:7 “and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed Him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.”

People get so much wrong, and most people have got this picture wrong. It is pictured in thousands and thousands of “nativity scenes” everywhere.

Usually the setting is quite pastoral, with Mary and Joseph watching as Jesus sleeps in the clean wooden feeding trough. The straw is fresh, and overhead the stars twinkle in the sky. Nearby the cattle and sheep rest contentedly and the faithful donkey (there’s almost always a donkey) watches the happy parents. And very often the shepherds and the wise men bow before the babe in the manger. It is a sweet and beautiful scene. But was it really like that? Far from it!

It wasn’t very peaceful; probably quite noisy and unsettled – crowds of uncomfortable people. It couldn’t have been that clean, it wouldn’t have been as beautiful as the pictures

show, and in fact the shepherds and the wise men didn't see Jesus at the same time. The wise men came months later, and there probably weren't three of them.

So the picture people have generally is quite different from what actually happened. Just as someone mentioned last week, that in the pictures of Jesus on the cross He usually looks pretty healthy, whereas His body was beaten to a pulp and looked broken and disfigured.

Luke 2:7 (KJV) "She wrapped him in (swaddling) cloths" – "And placed Him in a manger" – this is an animal's feeding trough.

Another excerpt from the web:

"Have you ever wondered about 'swaddling cloths?' In the Middle East, people travelling long distances were often met with many hardships and trials on their journeys. In the event of a death in travel, the body could not continue to be transported for many days. For that reason, travelers wrapped a thin, gauzelike cloth around their waist many times. If someone died on the journey, the others would use this cloth, referred to as 'swaddling cloths' to wrap the corpse in before burying them. When Jesus was born, there was no room at the inn, and so Mary and Joseph used a nearby stable for Jesus' birth. With no other cloth to use, Jesus was wrapped in Joseph's 'swaddling cloths' – the cloth normally reserved for a person's death. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords came into this world in a lowly manger and was wrapped with burial clothes – in truth, He was born to die. To die for the sins of all mankind. Even in birth, He was preparing for death – His ultimate reason for coming to earth...To save us from our sins."

If you were the God of the Universe, who created everything and possesses incredible power, and you wanted to send your son to earth, you could send Him as a fully grown yet sinless human being. He could come down in a shaft of light from heaven as a man. Or you could send Him as a baby in nice, pleasant surroundings, to reasonably wealthy parents.

But no, the One who is larger than the universe became an embryo, totally dependent on His mother, and came from the throne of heaven to a feeding trough! Why? Because He is humble, He is a servant, He loves the poor, the rejected, the abused, the mistreated, the forgotten people, and He came to bring salvation to them – and of course to everyone.

Philippians 2:5 "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:"

We should have a humble attitude like this.

Verses 6-7 "⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; ⁷rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

He was, and is, a servant. He is our King, but He is our servant.

Verse 8 "And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!"

He is humble. He wasn't only humble at His birth, but all through His life.

Matthew 8:20 "Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head."

He owned nothing but the clothes on His back, and when He was crucified, the soldiers gambled for His robe. When He died, they buried Him in a borrowed tomb.

Luke 2:7 Why was He put in the manger? "Because there was no room at the inn."

Imagine what that would've been like for Joseph and Mary. They would've prayed God would prepare a room for them – especially knowing their baby was special. But the baby was about to be born, and they were turned away from every hotel and put in a smelly, dirty stable. The word "inn" used here wasn't a hotel (that is a different Greek word), but a guest room, generally a cave in a hillside with low rock walls to keep the animals from wandering away in the night. There was no room for them even in a room like this. They were basically outside on their own.

Mary and Joseph must have wondered about this trial, these adverse circumstances! God could have easily made a room available. He could have created an entire hospital for them, or even a palace! But God works in that way – He often uses adverse circumstances that don't make sense at the time, in order to accomplish His purposes in the future. So don't let bad things get you down! Joseph and Mary didn't.

"No room at the inn" reminds me of John 1:11 –

"He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him." They didn't receive Him physically, and of course it was the same spiritually – they didn't receive His message.

We have to make sure there is room in our inn, in our hearts, to receive Him and His message.

John 1:12 "Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God—"

What a wonderful blessing it is for us that He came, He saved us, so that we can be born into the family of God. This is the message we have to give to the world. Jesus Christ came to earth as our Saviour and our Servant King, to give us the right to become children of God and live in His Kingdom forever.