

Minister's Message – December 2003

A Christmas Message

Surviving Christmas, Christmas chaos – these are some of the signs that you may see as you drive around today. Or you will come across mad shoppers, frantic and fighting over the last gift. In the midst of this you will hear the churches seeking to get out the message of Christmas – trying to put Christ back into Christmas.

It may come as a shock to you but Christ was never in Christmas. Do you read about Christmas anywhere in the Bible? Oh sure we read about the birth of Jesus – but anywhere that we should celebrate his birth when we do and in the way we do.

It may be another shock to you to find out that much of the celebration like Santa and the Christmas tree became popular relatively recently – in late 19th century – which was by the way a low point in the history of the Church – yes even our own church.

The very idea of Christmas (Christ's Mass) as celebrating the birth of Jesus did not come into the church until AD c.340 – when a Pope in Rome decided to adapt a pagan festival (at the time of the winter Solstice).

During the Reformation and particularly in Puritan England all celebration of Christmas was banned. Why was this? Were the Puritans so uninteresting, were they down on any form of enjoyment? I suspect not. Rather they were returning to the truth of the word of God. Worship God in the way instituted by himself and not according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan (WCF). A truth that impacts on the way we live and not just on what we say.

What then does the Bible teach about the birth of Christ? Remember there is no 'Christmas' in the Bible. We do read about the birth of Jesus of course, about God entering this world. And this is a glorious story and essential teaching for the believer. So much so that we will rejoice in this great truth today and next Lord's Day and every Lord's Day throughout the year.

Where, when, how, and why?

Where?

Bible clearly tells that Jesus the Christ was born in Bethlehem – Matthew 2, Luke 2. This may seem rather bland, a fact known by everyone. This is a good starting point – if all agree on that.

You see it is historically important that we have recorded the place where Jesus was born. No one knows where the gods of the Hindus were born (Ram or Krishna). That is because they are mythical figures. Jesus is not mythical and if people accept that he was born in Bethlehem then he is not mythical.

Also note that the Scriptures tell us some 700 years before the time of his birth that he was to be born in Bethlehem – Micah 5:2, Matthew 2. Do not pass over this too quickly. Seven hundred years before is a long time to predict something – you agree. The Jews knew this prophesy. They knew their king, their shepherd, would come from this place. One who would be in the line of David, who was the greatest earthly king of the Jews.

When?

The Scripture records in some detail the historical events surrounding the birth of Christ. Luke tells us that Augustus was the emperor (for a long time) but also that Quirinius was governor and the first census was being taken. This narrows down the years to between 4 and 6 BC.

Again it is important that we have some time in the history of the world because Jesus is an historical figure. Check your passport. It must have the place of birth and date of birth. Jesus qualifies as an historical person, a man like you and me – but also God as we will see.

What about December 25th then? This is not historical. We have no need to be so accurate and God has not chosen to give us the precise day. But this does not make his birth any less historical.

For man to guess at the day and then to build a great body of ritual around this day clearly was not what God intended, nor desires. What God wants us to understand is *when the time had fully come God sent his Son, born of a woman (Galatians 4:4)*.

How?

You will find less people agreeing about the 'how', the nature of Jesus' birth. Not all by any means who agree to the historicity of Jesus birth will agree to the teaching of **the virgin birth**. The so-called enlightenment of the 18th century, followed by the teaching of evolution, led to scepticism and rejection of anything supernatural.

We live in shadow of such rejection of the supernatural with prominent church leaders in USA and here in Australia still rejecting the virgin birth of Christ. They say it does not matter, that you can still be a Christian without believing that Jesus was born of a virgin. Such teaching they say is an affront to the modern scientific mind.

What do you believe? Do you accept as believers people who deny the virgin birth of Christ?

See what the Scripture says:

Matthew 1:18, 1:20, 1:25, Luke 1:35. She was with child by the Holy Spirit and Joseph had no union with her. Jesus was born of Mary but was not the child of Joseph. He was the Son of the Most High, the Son of God. This is what we read in the Scripture. *The word became flesh and dwelt among us* (John 1:14). Jesus, eternal with the God the Father – yes God the Son shared in our humanity, our flesh and blood (Hebrews 2:14).

This was a birth like no other. It was surrounded by supernatural signs and events. Angels appeared to Joseph, to Mary and to the Shepherds. Magi came hundred of miles guided by a star. This birth was not in a palace but was in a stable yet it was proclaimed near and far. Notice was given in the palace of the king and in the fields of the shepherds.

What does this mean, what is the consequence, of Jesus being the Son of God? It means, as God himself said, that we must listen to him – *this is my Son whom I have chosen, listen to him* (Luke 9:35). If Jesus is just another man like you or me, we would not have to listen, would we. We could pick and choose from what he said according to our desire. That is why man wants to deny the virgin birth. Jesus is just another man, a great teacher yes, a prophet even, but not God. If Jesus is God then we had better listen.

Why?

So tragic is it not that amid all the celebrating at this time of the year so few stop to think why. Millions of people on every continent and almost every nation celebrating but they don't know why? A man, a great man, a prophet or God himself? Now if this is God the Son what does that mean to me? I should listen OK. But what does he say?

We have only to look at the names to get some idea.

Jesus – like Joshua means the Lord saves – *he will save his people from their sins* Matthew 1:21. All people living in this world are living in sin. Jesus came to save people from their sin. The light shines in the darkness as John says. Those who look to the light, those who receive him, those who believe in his name become the children of God (John 1:12).

Immanuel – God with us. What wonder, what glory, what an occasion. The God of creation, sovereign Lord of all coming into this creation, this sinful world, for a time, for the express purpose of dying upon the Cross to save us from sin and death.

Immanuel, what a glorious name! Jesus, the name that is above every name, the name before which all men one day will bow the knee.

Oh yes we celebrate God becoming man to save us from our sin. We rejoice in the Lord always. Not just one day a year. Don't you want to rejoice in him every day?

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