

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Today is Christmas Day and my remit this morning is to bring a message that is commensurate for such an occasion. However before I do so I think that it might be helpful to make some reference as to the inception of Christmas in this country. How it began and what is its significance. Most people have a hazy notion that it has some religious association but few, and particularly those of the younger generation, have little idea of its underlying meaning. To them it is simply a time of merrymaking, eating and drinking, giving of presents and family reunions, but in fact these activities have little to do with the spirit that Christmas should convey.

The Christian faith was first proclaimed by Jesus Christ in the first century and subsequently preached and divinely developed by His apostles. It flourished rapidly and by the fourth century was accepted throughout the greater part of the then known world. But by then the Christians, as its adherents were called, had become somewhat disillusioned. They looked around and saw how the followers of pagan faiths had their feasts and celebrations which so allured them that they decided to institute some similar celebration that they could keep. Ancient Rome observed the feast of Saturnalia in the month of December and it was a feast of unrestrained merrymaking. December 25 was supposed to be the birthday of Mithras, the Persian God of Light, and the Christians decided that that day would be the birthday of Jesus Christ and celebrated accordingly. So it was that Christmas became part of the Christian calendar and we can see that it has no Scriptural authority and was founded on a basis of human desire for pleasure and satisfaction combined with superstition.

But we might ask the question: "What is or was Christmas intended to celebrate?" and the answer is without doubt "Jesus Christ". The birth of Jesus Christ is a fact, it cannot be gainsaid. Josephus, the Jewish historian, makes a brief reference to Him and, as we have already indicated, His name was being preached all over Europe in the first century. But chiefly the life, and for our purposes this morning, his birth is recorded in the Holy Scriptures and it is to this book that we must turn for our information. In the Old Testament there are hundreds of references to Him, given of course in a prophetic way; in the New Testament we have four accounts of His life followed by an account of the church which He is building and then an unfolding of the doctrine expounded by His apostles, and which is still relevant for us today. All speak of Him - we might term the Bible as being Christocentric.

Let us then look at those passages in the Scriptures which tell us about His birth. They are found chiefly in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Matthew is the gospel which presents Him as the King and gives some details of His birth including a genealogy which traces His human ancestry, through Joseph, his human father back to David, King of Israel. Luke is the gospel which presents Him as the Son of Man and also gives an account of His birth together with a genealogy which takes His line back through Mary, his human mother, but again back to David the King. These facts are an indication of the divine authorship of the Bible. Both a king and a man would be interested in his birth and ancestry, but in the gospel by Mark which presents Him as a servant no such information is found - who is interested in such details of a servant? John is the gospel which presents Him as the Son of God who, of course, had no birth and no ancestry.

Referring to both these gospels we learn that an angel was sent before the birth of Christ to both Joseph and Mary to tell them of the coming event and to apprise them of the name or rather names by which He was to be known. In the case of Mary we are told that that angel's name was Gabriel and we would presume that it was the same heavenly messenger that was sent to Joseph. At that time Mary was a virgin and the birth would therefore be miraculous, for when she queried the angelic message "How shall this be?" the answer was "The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee".

This is something which today is both denied and ridiculed but which is, in fact, vital to the Christian faith which I will enlarge on later. It is also a fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah for in 7:14 he states "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son". Further Gabriel announces that "He...shall be called the Son of the Highest" and "The holy thing which shall be born shall be called Son of God". So it was known at least by His human parents that the One whom Mary would bring into the world was no ordinary man. A true man? Yes - but also God manifest in flesh. The apostle Paul refers to it in 1 Timothy 3:16: "Great is the mystery of godliness; God was manifest in the flesh". Perhaps at this point it might be relevant to say a word about Mary in view of all the false and superstitious teaching that is promulgated with reference to her. Although Gabriel describes her as "Highly favoured; the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among

women", she was nevertheless an ordinary woman. The birth of her first son was immaculate, her own was not. She like us all was a sinner and indeed confessed her need of a Saviour.

In her song of praise recorded in Luke 1:46-55 often referred to as the 'Magnificat' she cries "My spirit hath rejoiced in God my saviour". From what did she need saving if she was without sin as some assert. A further name was revealed to Joseph and again it was a name foretold by Isaiah in the verse already referred to. The appearance of the angel to Joseph we are told took place in order that Isaiah's prophecy "They shall call His name Emmanuel" should be fulfilled. Emmanuel means 'God with us' and now God who ever delighted to dwell amongst His people - He walked with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden - He dwelt in the tabernacle erected by Moses in the wilderness in the midst of His people, the children of Israel - later His house was the temple built by Solomon - He will now be "with us" as a man.

There was one further name which the angel gave to both Mary and Joseph and it is the name by which the Lord Christ is most familiarly known. It is the name Jesus and in Matthew 1:21 Joseph is specifically told that it shall be given Him because "He shall save His people from their sins". Jesus means "Jehovah is salvation". John in 1 John 4:14 declares "The Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world" and in John 4:34 he writes "Jesus saith unto them, 'My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me, and to finish His work'". He was in the world to carry out the purposes of God, that was His work and that work was the salvation of mankind.

We now come to the pivotal point of our remarks this morning. Who or what is Christmas intended to celebrate? And without doubt the answer must be Jesus Christ. Furthermore if we are to learn anything about the One who is (or should be) the central theme of Christmas, as already stated our information must come from the Bible.

Amongst other things we find that His birth was announced by an angel to a company of shepherds who were looking after their flocks during the night. The glory of the Lord which accompanied the angel's visitation put fear into the shepherds but the words of the angel quickly dissipated this.

"Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11) These shepherds were of course Jews and as such they looked for the coming of Messiah who would deliver them from the bondage of Rome and restore the kingdom to Israel. Now he is here for Christ means Messiah - for more than a century they had been under the dominion of the Roman Empire - soon they will be free. This was indeed good tidings of great joy. As they waited beholding this wonderful sight "There was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and good will toward men". (Luke 2:13-14) Immediately they went to Bethlehem where "they found Mary, Joseph and the babe lying in a manger". They could do nothing else but praise God and tell all their neighbours what they had seen. The shepherds, such was their personal rejoicing, apparently did not appreciate that the angelic message was peace and goodwill to all men. We will dwell on this later.

Thus we have seen that this child, miraculously born, was to be king over Israel and accordingly had descended from King David. But this being so there was another prophecy that needed fulfilment and we find it in Micah 5:2: "But thou Bethlehem Ephrathah though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting". Bethlehem was the city of David and in Luke 2:1-7 we are told how God so arranged things through Caesar Augustus issuing a decree of taxation that Mary was in Bethlehem at the time of her delivery. This would have been of no surprise to Mary for the angel had clearly told her that her child would be a king. She had been told "The Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David, and He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever and of His Kingdom there shall be no end".

Another prophecy of Isaiah concerning the names by which this child should be known is given in Isaiah 9:6-7. "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and the government shall be upon His shoulders; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon His kingdom, to order it and establish it with justice and with righteousness from henceforth even for ever." Thus even hundreds of years before His coming into the world God gave prophetic notification as to the power, majesty, dignity and glory that would be His and also the supreme position He would assume over the kingdom of Israel. This prophecy is another example of the exactness of Scripture. Unto us a Child is born but unto us a Son is given. Christ was a child only from His human birth, but He was always the Son of God and as such He was given.

But these things did not happen. What became of the babe of Bethlehem? We do, of course, have the remainder of His life set out in the four gospels and we find that it did not end on a throne in Jerusalem but on a cross just outside the city wall. Such a life and such a death certainly demand an enquiry and first we would notice that there were a few who acknowledged His divine advent. For instance, in Matthew 2:1-2 we read of a company of 'wise men' who resided in the east and, some time after the birth of Christ, were divinely advised of His birth and moreover were given divine guidance as to where to find Him. Under the impression that they were looking for a king they first went to Jerusalem

where their local enquiries got to the ears of Herod, the monstrous tyrant who was then the pseudo king over Israel. Herod, much troubled by this news, enquired of the priests and scribes where the Christ was to be born and, on learning that it was Bethlehem, sent the wise men thereto with the instruction that when they had found Him they were to report back His whereabouts to Herod. The star which had guided them their entire journey continued to Bethlehem to the very house where the child lay. There they fell down and worshipped Him and presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Being warned by God of Herod's evil intention to murder the child they returned to their country by another way.

In Luke 2:21-38 we read of two elderly souls who recognised the divine significance of the child Jesus. When He was forty days old His parents brought Him to the temple to present Him to the Lord. A certain Simeon was there at the time and the Holy Spirit revealed to him that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. That moment had now arrived and taking the child in his arms he blessed God and said, "Lord, now lettest thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation". Also present was Anna, a prophetess, and likewise upon seeing Him she gave thanks and "spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Israel". Two elderly saints who recognised and accepted the child Jesus for whom He was and what He would accomplish.

There were others who accepted Him. He chose twelve disciples and all save one acclaimed Him as Son of God and the Christ. We also read of a company of women who ministered to Him during His public life. But to the vast majority He was a rejected Christ from the beginning. There was no room for Mary in the inn and consequently our Lord was born in a stable. Think of that! A coming king and moreover the Son of God whose birth cradle was an animal's feeding trough. King Herod, when he realised that the wise men had double-crossed him, ordered that all children under two years of age were to be killed. What a slaughter to get rid of one child - such was the hostility demonstrated against this Holy Babe.

Throughout His public life Satan was in constant pursuit of Him using the Jewish nation and particularly its religious leaders as his instruments of aggression. They were ever on the lookout to find some fault in Him for which they could put Him to death. John in his gospel records that "He came unto His own (Remember that Christ, as a man, was a Jew) and His own received Him not." John 1:11. Finally the climax came when, unable to find a legitimate charge against Him, with the aid of false witnesses and blackmail against Pontius Pilate the Roman governor they secured a conviction and the sentence of death by crucifixion.

But here it was that the purposes of God would be worked out, here the work which God had given Him to do would be accomplished, His declaration "Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God" would be carried out. Man, in Adam, by the sin of disobedience had alienated himself from God and incurred the penalty God had prescribed. "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." Genesis 2:19. But Adam did eat of it and so "As by one man sin entered into the world and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for all have sinned." The Bible clearly and emphatically states that "God is not willing that any should perish but His holiness and righteousness demands that if man is to escape, sin has to be dealt with and that can only be by the penalty being paid. Clearly he, already a sinner, cannot pay such; it needs one wholly free of sin himself to fulfil the task. In short the Lord Jesus Christ was the only one who could undertake it. Hence we see the necessity of the virgin birth. One who was a true man but a unique man, one who was absolutely free from the taint of sin and additionally one who could die.

Death had no claim upon Christ. When He was upon the cross the chief priests, scribes and elders mocked Him: "Let Him come down from the cross and we will believe Him" (Matthew 27:42). The rulers derided Him: "He saved others, let Him save Himself". Of course, He could have saved Himself but had He done so God's purposes would never have been accomplished - salvation would not be possible - men would die in their sins. His was a voluntary sacrifice. He could have called upon 12 legions of angels to help Him (Matthew 26:53) and He had stated in John 10:17-18, "Therefore doth my Father love Me because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from Me but I lay it down of myself". When Christ died the cross was veiled in darkness. God did not permit any eye to witness the awful judgment that was poured out upon His beloved Son. From that darkness the cry was heard "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken Me?" and, when the work was completed, again "It is finished". The work of redemption is accomplished - salvation is available for all.

But some might rejoin, "If what you say is true why do preachers speak about eternal punishment as well as eternal life - if salvation is available for all why are not all saved - how is this blessing effectual for me?" I reply by strongly affirming that forgiveness of sins, eternal life, a place in heaven is available for all. One text of Scripture among a hundred others is sufficient. John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish but have everlasting life." You see, God has made possible the way, He has made the offer and all that we have to do is to accept it and we do this by believing on His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who He is and what He has done. If a generous benefactor offers me a cheque and says "Present this at your

bank and your overdraft will be cleared, all that I have to do is to present the cheque and my debt is paid. If I fail to present it I remain in debt.

We come back to the implied question of our opening remarks. Is Christmas important? My reply would be that the basic facts that Christmas should highlight are, but what it has now for its main concept - superstition, pleasure, commercialism, etc. - are of no help in focusing our minds on what should be its spiritual lessons. The birth of Christ with all its wonders, His life with its great moral lessons, could not move us one inch nearer to heaven. His death is everything. I close with one verse of Scripture: "Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver and gold ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot."

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