



The birth of Jesus: A world event

Sermon by the Rev Gregor Henderson,
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Bible readings: Isaiah 52:7-10; John 1:1-14

With the birth of Jesus a huge shift in the Bible takes place. Before Jesus, the emphasis is on Israel as God's chosen people and on God as Israel's God. Before Jesus, God acts almost exclusively for the people of Israel and other people – Gentiles – are generally regarded as enemies. Before Jesus, Biblical religion is centred on Jerusalem and its temple with its program of regular sacrifices to a God who is to be feared as well as loved.

Luke chapter 1 tells of the miraculous pregnancies of Elizabeth and Mary, and includes the beautiful songs of Mary and Zechariah, the Magnificat and the Benedictus. But Jesus is not yet born. In the Magnificat the action of God is still largely seen as for the people of Israel – “he has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy”. In Zechariah's song there is much reference to enemies and the coming salvation is for “his people”, the Lord God of Israel.

But in Luke chapter 2 Jesus is born, and there's a seismic shift. The angels sing to the shepherds “Glory to God in highest heaven and on earth peace, good will among all”. God's now acting for the whole earth, enemies have disappeared. The devout old man Simeon meets the baby Jesus in the temple a few days later and then announces he's seen God's salvation which God has prepared for all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles. In Matthew's Christmas account wise men come from far away to the east, following a star, and while for Matthew there are still enemies in the person of Herod and his henchmen Jesus' birth clearly has worldwide, even cosmic, significance.

Parts of the Old Testament of course, especially the prophet Isaiah 600 years before, had foreseen that God would act like this one day. “All the ends of the earth”, he prophesied, “shall see the salvation of our God”.

John's gospel commences with the marvellous hymn about the Word of God, the Word made flesh that came to dwell among us. “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people”. In the coming of Jesus God is acting in love towards all people, offering his salvation to all people, revealing good news of reconciliation, love, peace for all. Because of Jesus, everyone can have a close loving relationship with God – knowing God's acceptance, forgiveness and love.

As the ministry of Jesus unfolds, we find Jesus never limits the grace of God. God's good news is for everyone, Jews and Gentiles, women and men, rich and poor (especially the poor), slaves and free (especially slaves). After Jesus' death and resurrection the church sets out with the good news to the ends of the earth. It's a huge shift in our understanding of God's nature and the extraordinary breadth of God's purpose and love.

This Biblical shift has deep consequences for those of us drawn to the way of Jesus. Anything that narrows down this Christmas vision of God's love for all people is anathema. Anything that treats another person, whatever their circumstances, as less than human, less than loved by God, is repugnant. Anything that brands someone else primarily as enemy rather than firstly as one of God's loved people, is wrong.

So Christmas makes a huge difference to religion and to life. Among the differences are these three:

One, a broad world view is the way of Christ. Nations are secondary, national interest is secondary, national borders are secondary. Christians look to the interests of the whole world, for Christ came for everyone, “peace on earth, goodwill among all”. So Christians will always be a thorn in the flesh of those who put national interest first and foremost. We are bound to ask questions about overseas wars, the fairness of international trade systems, the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, so-called citizenship tests, about world poverty, about climate change.

Two, generosity and grace are the way of Christ. We now know God’s love is there for everyone, near and far. And if God loves them, who are we to regard them as unlovable, as dispensable, as beneath concern? So Christians will always be among the most unselfish and most generous of people, sharing their possessions and money and selves with those in need, near and far. If we didn’t have a Christmas Bowl appeal already, then we’d have to invent it.

Three, acceptance of diversity and inclusion are the way of Christ. God loves the whole world but God doesn’t expect or require us all to be the same. Different nationalities, languages, and cultures all have a place. They are part of the rich fabric of God’s creation. The church from the very beginning has been multicultural, open to Jew and Gentile, to Greek and Roman, to Ethiopian and Arab. The valuing of multiculturalism is part of the answer to racial and community tensions in the world, it’s not the problem. Christians welcome different cultures, within the one world of humanity. One in eight worshippers in the Uniting Church today will be worshipping in languages other than English.

Christmas surely is a world event. God’s love is now revealed for everyone. God’s love is for you and for me. Turn to God, and receive. Rejoice in the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth.

To the glory of God, Amen.

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