

What's Happened to Christmas? **Preached at the Christmas Midnight service 2010**

Christmas is not what it used to be. For all sorts of reasons Christmas, for many in our society, has lost a lot of its specialness and distinctive, unique seasonal flavour.

Of course, firstly we can blame commercialization: Christmas trees in shops, and advertising for Christmas go up at the start of November, or even earlier. No longer is Christmas a really special "December birthday" but it is over-extended and loses all its concentrated specialness and we get sick of it rather than get excited by it.

Secondly, we can blame political correctness: No longer is it considered to be politically correct and multi-culturally sensitive to have Nativity scenes and carols and special Christmas religious connections in shopping centres and schools and kinders and even some city councils are clamping down on Christmas scenes lighting up front gardens of houses. So sadly, Christmas is increasingly embraced and celebrated as some sort of religion-less holiday and a party time and family celebration that has lost most of its connectedness to the Christian faith origins.

Thirdly, we can blame technology and the internet which have caused a significant decrease in the sending and receiving of Christmas cards as people now send email Christmas letters and E-cards that twitter and jingle on the screen. I have to say I deplore them. It is a bit of a chore to write and address well over 130 Christmas cards as I do, but it is a gift of love and care to people who are, or who have been, important in my life and especially people whom I rarely see but nevertheless I want to be remembered at this special season of giving and blessing and loving. These cards acknowledge that we celebrate the greatest gift of love ever in God's son born to be one of us.

Finally, we can blame busyness and stress, cut backs and higher electricity prices for the almost total lack of Christmas lights and Christmas trees and Christmas decorations in our shopping strips and particularly on our suburban houses. Moreover, the Christmas trees we do see in shops often are laden with commercial gear such as the tree in the local TSL Brands shop window laden with underwear! It is an advertising tree, not a Christmas tree. Our streets are dismally unfestive and even I, a lover of Christmas and all it means, find it difficult to maintain the momentum when there is so much apathy around, even among people of committed Christian persuasion.

But Christmas is at the core of our Christian faith. It is absolutely central with the celebration of Easter to our *raison d'être* – our reason for being – as people of Christian faith. Christmas celebrates the most amazing belief that God – the creator of the universe and of its incredible complexity and infinity – could so love this tiny earth in the vast infinity of what is out there – that God could so love this earth and so love us who are often very intractable and at times seemingly unlovable! That God would risk to become for an instant in time one of us, that God would, if you like, "take on skin and bones and the whole wonderful and messy bits of being human" so that God could assure us that we are forever blessed and loved in his mystery of creation.

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Part of the purpose of Christmas is to show us how God responds to what we really most need. First note that God's answer is not the answer we expect of an all powerful, all wondrous God.

Mary does not prove to be a royal princess. The value of the three wise men's gifts seems to be more in their meaning than their monetary value. And for all of the angels and signs in the heavens, Joseph and his family just barely get out of Bethlehem with no time to spare before Herod's storm troopers come in and seek to kill all the baby boys.

The biblical Christmas story is very much a family and communal event, but not what you might expect. No sooner do we meet Joseph in Matthew's version than we see him trying to figure out how to break up with Mary with the least humiliation and embarrassment for the two of them. She's pregnant and he's certainly not the biological father. He wants out!!

It takes God's direct intervention in the dream-visit of an angel for Joseph to discover that the right thing to do is just the opposite of what he was raised to believe. Love and compassion are for rigid rules.

We hear little of the emotional lives of Mary and Joseph in the story, but we see them each acting generously and graciously under extreme stress. In Luke's account we see Mary's perspective on her pregnancy, how she accepts her problematic status and sees in it God at work, regardless of what anyone else might think.

By the end of the story, Mary and Joseph have each been brave in their own way – in facing down their doubt, in facing physical danger, in making difficult choices, and in staying together. Perhaps one of the significant but undervalued lessons for families and communities at Christmas is that difficult times can be opportunities for deeper blessings and that what we have always believed needs to be tested against what God might be calling us to now. And Christmas is not just about us! There are plenty of "others" in the Christmas story – the poor, the outsider, the unwashed!. There are plenty of "thems" in the Christmas story.

It's perfectly fine for the dirty, redneck shepherds to be abiding in the fields by night with their flocks, as long as they stay there.

Shepherds are outsiders, unable, by the demands of their profession, to keep the various requirements of the law. But they did not just stumble onto the manger and the baby Jesus by accident; they were the only ones with a hand-delivered invitation from God. And God doesn't just send a messenger; he dispatches the whole tabernacle choir in their best vestments to back up the message with full choral accompaniment!

It's a pretty big deal for working shepherds who generally never make it to the top of anyone's guest list! God is not just speaking platitudes about hospitality and inclusion, God is making sure the working people on the nightshift get included first.

Then God also gives place of honour to the Magi, Arabs from the East, unclean outsiders of a different sort than shepherds. The East was the direction of Babylon, the ancient biblical place of exile, and Magi were certainly pagans, and whether they were actually kings or just wise

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astrologers, they were definitely not people observing the traditions of the people of God. And yet they, not the King of Jerusalem, were the ones who came guided by a star to honour the eternal King of the Jews. The distinguished temple scholars knew that if the Messiah was ever actually to come, it would be in Bethlehem. They were clueless that it was happening right now! The outsiders get it; the insiders, at best, are oblivious to God's active presence and, at worst, are like Herod who sends in his troops to wipe out the possibility of God's son becoming King in his place.

The Christmas story reminds us that God sometimes speaks to "others outside" more directly and more clearly than to people like "us". God went to considerable lengths to be sure that night-shift shepherds and pagan astrologers got the word - they got tickets to the world premiere. If that is how God treats "them", then perhaps there is a lesson there for "us" to be inclusive and always open to God's presence everywhere.

The essence of the Christmas story is that in the darkness, light shines, and the darkness does not overcome it. The Christmas lights will be packed up and put away, trees will go to the green waste bin, and all that we bought will fade away. But if we can take all that Christmas is really about and, like Mary, ponder it in our hearts, then what a life of joy and peace lies ahead of us.

Rejoice and be glad – it is a wonderful and awesome mystery to share and celebrate!