

2. It's a revealing birth - Bringing the wonderful revelation of God's Person

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Date: 19 December 2010

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[0 : 00] I guess if you took a straw poll from the man in the street out in Buchanan Street today and asked what he thinks about Christmas, well, you'd get a lot of different answers, wouldn't you?

A season of indulgence, good food and drink, a great chance for a good break from work in the midst of all this awful weather, some new additions perhaps to your sock drawer. Maybe that's just a man's perspective.

What would the woman in Buchanan Street think? Probably much the same. Maybe a few other thoughts about Christmas shopping, lots of relatives to feed, visits to the in-laws, or even worse, in-laws visiting you, or all such other seasonal stresses.

But I guess that if you ask that question, most people wouldn't have an awful lot to say about the birth that really lies at the very heart of Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ.

I read somewhere recently that in this country, a lot more people associate Christmas with the name Santa Claus than they do with Jesus Christ. If you ask somebody specifically, though, about what's special about the birth of Jesus, again, I think you would get varied answers.

[1 : 12] If that person in the street you asked happened to be a Muslim, I think you'd get a very respectful answer. He's a prophet. He's revered alongside other prophets. If that person's a Buddhist, they might well, again, be respectful and say, well, yes, Jesus was a great moral teacher.

He offers a degree of enlightenment. But to many secular Scots today, I think it's fair to say that there's really nothing special at all about the birth of Jesus Christ.

It's just really an irrelevance. Just really a swear word. But whatever the view that people might have, I think probably most people would be united in one thing at least.

Whoever Jesus of Nazareth was, he was just a man. Perhaps a remarkable man. Perhaps a very good man. Maybe someone to be admired. But in the end, no more than that.

Just a human being. So Jesus' birth, although it's a good excuse for a midwinter festival, it really isn't that different from the birth of, well, Isaac Newton, or Einstein, or Churchill, or any number of other great figures of history.

[2 : 24] Well, it's the world we live in today. I think that's a fair picture I've painted. It's a secular world. It's a pluralist world. It's a multicultural, multi-faith world.

And that, of course, is a challenge, isn't it, for the Christian church. And not surprisingly, many in the church will say, well, look, if we're going to survive as an institution in today's secularist, pluralist world, we need to change our focus.

We need to become a bit more relevant to the people that live today, more acceptable to 21st century Scots. Because, you see, the modern mind, the mind of our secular scientists and so on, they can't accept the miraculous today.

So we've got to ditch that from the church today. Gone. Then, of course, there's the post-modern mind, so-called the liberal, multiculturalist person.

And they cannot accept any claim to exclusivity today in religion, that Jesus Christ somehow would be unique. So we need to ditch that idea as well.

[3 : 30] We want people to accept the Christian church today. Well, we need to give people what they want, or what they think they need and will accept. That's what Tesco do, isn't it?

They're so successful. They give people attractive, inoffensive tasting products that cost very little. That's what sells today. That's why nowadays you get at Christmastime and at Easter time too, you get all sorts of churchmen and people appearing on TV and radio programs, important Christian people, speaking about the Christian message.

telling us that they're making the Christian story much, much more relevant now, and people really ought to come to church because of it. So John Humphreys says on the Today program, well, Archbishop, you're not telling me really that you don't believe these stories in the Bible about Jesus' birth, are you?

Ah, yes, says the Archbishop, of course, these stories are true, but in a profoundly mythical kind of a way. Not perhaps the way it might first seem to the rather simplistic and literalistic reader of the Bible, but to the more sophisticated person, indeed, depths of meaning and great richness. That's the sort of thing you see that will appeal to people today. Well, that sort of thing sounds great, doesn't it? But try that approach on your bank manager.

[4 : 58] Yes, Mr. Bank Manager, my overdraft is excessively large, but only in a profoundly mythical sort of a way. Stop being so simplistic and literalistic about the size of these figures on my credit card bill.

Be a bit more sophisticated, Mr. Bank Manager. Now, does that work with your bank? If it does, please tell me, because I'd like to move my account there tomorrow. So, you see, that's a rather absurd approach that's taken by many speaking so-called for the Christian church today, who think they're going to help the church impact the contemporary world by using that sort of language. Here's what one of them says. All that the Christmas story about Jesus means, he says, is this, quote, that a metaphorically pre-existent being of somewhat uncertain status has been sent into the world.

I don't know what you make of that, but I can't really understand it. No miracle, just myth. Here's another one. The revelation of God's love in the human life of Jesus is just one of many mutually supporting pointers to God.

See, nothing exclusive at all about Jesus. Just one among many. Vague, metaphorical, and so on. The problem with all of this, of course, is that when you actually open the Bible and read what's in it, you find nothing metaphorical and vague and uncertain at all in what it tells us about the significance of Jesus Christ.

[6 : 38] Listen to the beginning of the letter to the Hebrews. It says this, Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

Now, that is a fairly unequivocal statement, isn't it? I think so. So, if we're going to be honest in the Christian church, and surely, surely we must be honest and straightforward in the Christian church. We're not politicians. We're not spin doctors trying to deceive people. If we're going to be honest, we must be clear that the idea that somehow or other you can have some kind of Christianity that doesn't conflict at all with secular world views, causes no offence at all to other religious beliefs, that just simply isn't possible.

Not possible. That's a myth. So, for the modern revisionist theologian, the birth of Jesus merely reveals something rather vague about ourselves, about our own religious consciousness, about our own quest for meaning, and so on.

But for the Bible, it's quite the opposite. The birth of Jesus, according to the Bible, reveals something completely unique and utterly profound about the person of God himself.

[7 : 59] The birth of Jesus, according to the Bible, is a revealing birth. It's a birth that brings us a wonderful revelation about the person of the one and only God who made this universe.

I don't want you to take my word for that, but I do want to point you to the words of a very reliable eyewitness theologian whose words can certainly be trusted to tell us the truth about Jesus.

His name is Matthew. He wrote the first gospel. It's one of the very best attested ancient manuscripts in the whole world, dating from the first century. He was a contemporary of Jesus, and he writes to lead us out of fog and out of myth and into the world of clarity and light and certainty about the real significance of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Matthew, by the way, was a tax man by trade, so he is a plain speaker. He's used to looking at hard facts and figures, not myths, and he's used to telling it as it is, just like those brown envelopes from the Inland Revenue tend to do.

And he says, the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. That is, no other way, no mythical way, no ambiguity, no unclarity, this way that I'm going to unfold to you.

[9 : 22] So in our Christmas services this year, between now and Christmas Day, we're looking at what Matthew tells us about what is special about Jesus' birth. And I want you to notice something very, very important.

Matthew is not, in his account, just reporting to us the events of that first Christmas. He is doing that. He's doing it very accurately. But more than that, he is giving us the interpretation of what these events mean.

Matthew is a messenger who is moved and is directed by God himself. and he gives us God's own authoritative interpretation of what these events mean.

Often people say, don't they, oh, I love the Christmas story. But they just don't give me any of that theology. But the thing is, the Bible makes clear that the Christmas story is a story with a meaning. And it can't be real in any other way. Not just any meaning that we might fancy giving it as we read it, but rather the meaning that God himself gives it, just as that story is told to us in the Bible.

[10 : 31] In other words, it's a story that comes to us with its own divine interpretation. It is a revelation from God himself. That's what the birth of Jesus is.

It's an invasion, if you like, into our time and our history of the one and only true God. God. And it's an invasion that takes place so that we can at last know this God who is eternal and infinite and otherwise would be absolutely beyond our understanding.

Matthew's account is very, very clear indeed. There may be mystery. In fact, there must be mystery because how possibly could finite human beings fully understand the infinite God?

We couldn't. So there is a degree of mystery, but there is no myth. Matthew is clear about the historical truth of what he's telling us.

I want you to look at how he gives us the story from both the human perspective and from the divine perspective. Verses 18 and 19 of Matthew chapter 1 give us the human standpoint.

[11 : 40] It's very matter-of-fact and it smacks, doesn't it, of authenticity. There's absolutely nothing unlikely whatsoever in the human reactions that are presented. Mary and Joseph are betrothed.

That's more than just what we would call an engagement. The way it worked in those days was that a couple became engaged and then they had one whole year of betrothal when they were legally bound to one another but they hadn't yet begun to live together.

The end of that year the groom would go to the bride's parents' home and fetch her and take her back to be fully at last his wife. But to be betrothed was to be as good as married.

And so Joseph's reaction was absolutely natural when he discovered that Mary was pregnant. Now she's clearly had an affair. Now legally it was adultery because they were as good as married.

And he could have publicly disgraced her, exposed her and in doing so cleared his own name and made it absolutely clear to everybody that he had not impregnated her.

[12 : 50] And we're told he was a just man, a righteous man. Notice that means he couldn't just sweep it aside as though it hadn't happened, it didn't matter, but he was compassionate, he was merciful.

And so no doubt with a very, very heavy heart he made his decision to divorce her quietly. Don't miss Joseph's grace by the way. Most men don't behave like that, do they?

Most men would have been vindictive, perhaps even violent. You can understand the pain of that human situation, can't you? On both sides. And when you read those verses you would naturally think, well that's it.

That's the end of the story. Love gone sour, another fractured relationship. But look at how the story does in fact end in verses 24 and 25.

in fact it's a total turnaround, isn't it? Joseph does take Mary home as his wife. What on earth has happened to affect that complete turnaround?

[13 : 56] Well it's all explained by the divine perspective on these events that are given in verse 20. This is not a case of adultery, nor it is a normal pregnancy of any kind whatsoever.

This is a work of God. That which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. It's from God. It's an extraordinary creative act of the Spirit of the Creator God.

In verse 18 where it says the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way, that word for birth is the Greek word *Genesis*. It means origin or beginning.

It's the name isn't it of the first book of the Bible, the book of *Genesis*, of beginnings. And what we read there about what happened right at the beginning was that the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep.

And from his intervention began the *Genesis*, the beginning of all creation. And here, says the angel, is the story of a new *Genesis*.

[15:05] A new beginning. A creative act from the Holy Spirit. And just to emphasize, it's there a second time in verse 20. Came from the Holy Spirit.

All the initiative is from God. It's by his Spirit. It's not explained. It's a reverent mystery. It's beyond us to know how this could take place. But it's not argued.

It's just stated plainly as a known fact. And there are plenty of early Christians still alive. When Matthew wrote these words, they could have disputed it if it was a disputed thing, but it wasn't. What Matthew is telling us is what one theologian has called the central fact of the Christian faith. That the eternal Son of God took upon himself our humanity, not that the man Jesus somehow acquired divinity.

Look how clearly and carefully it's stated, so as to leave absolutely no misunderstanding at all. Verse 18 clearly says, no sexual intercourse had taken place prior to this conception.

[16:17] It was before they came together. Again, verse 25, no sexual intercourse took place prior to the birth.

He knew her not until she had given birth to her son. You see, the emphasis is on the uniqueness of the divine origin of this child.

It's a birth that is fully human. His mother Mary is, yes, an ordinary woman in every respect. The Bible never suggests anything otherwise. Yes, this conception is indeed miraculous.

But thereafter, yes, she has normal relationships with Joseph, she has other sons and daughters. But Jesus is born of a fully human, normal woman.

And yet, the birth is also fully divine. Nowhere in the Bible is Joseph ever called Jesus' father. In fact, the word at the end of the genealogy of his birth in verse 16 of Matthew 1 is very, very careful.

[17:24] Joseph is called Mary's husband and Jesus is born of her, but not of him. Only God is ever called the father of Jesus in Matthew's gospel.

It's 100% clear. It's a supernatural birth. It's a unique birth. It's an incarnation, an enfleshing of God Almighty himself.

Why is that so important? Why do we have to focus on this theology, being so insistent about it, so dogmatic about it? Surely, surely we can all just agree with people who like Jesus and like his message and see it as a good thing.

Surely we can just agree with them and share Jesus' teaching with the world. Why can't we just join forces with people who honour Jesus in some sort of a special way, even if they don't accept that Jesus is divine?

People of the Mormon faith, or Jehovah's Witnesses, or Muslims indeed, or Hindus. All of these have a place for Jesus, a very special place for Jesus, among others.

[18:35] Why don't we just join with all of them? That might seem a very fair question today, especially nowadays in our pluralistic world.

But if you know anything about the history of the Christian church, you'll know that that question is the question that has been at the heart of so many battles for the church all, all through its history. Indeed, in the 4th century, the whole worldwide church literally split in two over this very question, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is the only fully divine, fully human revelation of God to man.

It was so important that it was more important than keeping the unity of the whole world professing church in that century. Why?

Why is it so absolutely central and vital to the Christian faith to accept that, as Matthew tells us, Jesus is fully, fully divine, that he is, as the Nicene Creed puts it, God of God, light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not created, being of one substance with the Father.

[19:50] Why is that so important? Well, let me put it another way, turn the question around. What if we do away with the incarnation?

incarnation? What if we say it is just myth and Jesus is not literally God in the flesh? What if he's just one idea about God?

Or one manifestation of God and his love? Or even just one incarnation of God amidst many others? Not the only incarnation of God.

Just one of the revelations, as you might have from many other religions. Where are we left with if that was the case? Friends, I'm afraid that where we're left is in a place of confusion and of ignorance and indeed of fear.

Because we're left with absolutely no assurance of what God really is like. If in Jesus we don't have the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, the exact imprint of his nature, if we don't have in

Jesus the exact image of God on high, then where do we find that?

[21 : 09] Can we find that? Perhaps we can't. So ultimately we're left with an unknown God, an invisible God.

Either Jesus Christ really was God, as he claimed he was, or we don't yet have a full and complete and unique revelation of God. We've just got lots of different, perhaps, and indeed, yes, very highly contradictory revelations that point to God from all kinds of different religious perspectives.

If Jesus is not God fully in the flesh, we can't be sure that the real God is actually all that like Jesus at all. If we say, yes, well, Jesus is revealing something of God, how do we know that there isn't a whole lot more of God that we don't know in Jesus?

It might be very, very different from what we do see in Jesus. Maybe that's just one facet of God that we see in Jesus, his loving side, his gracious side. What about all those other facets that are hidden?

A terrible, vengeful side, an unforgiving side, a demonic, capricious side. See, if Jesus is not fully and wholly God, then we're left with that anxiety, with that fear about God and what he really is like.

[22 : 35] And he might turn out to be very, very different to what we see in Jesus Christ. That's very terrifying. Because what that means is that all Christianity can offer, is what all man-made religions offer.

A relentless uncertain quest to do your best to please and to appease an unknown God, hoping you can do enough of the right things to gain their favour.

Never being really sure, never knowing confidently what God is really, really like. But no, says Matthew, I'm not speaking about religion in this book.

I'm not speaking about human beings reaching up to try and find out a glimpse of what God might be like. I'm speaking about revelation, about God who comes down to reveal himself fully and completely to human beings, permanently showing himself to us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, God the Son in the flesh.

God, God, God, God, God, God, God, God, God, through the power of his Holy Spirit, made his eternal Son incarnate, enfleshed of the Virgin Mary to become man and to reveal to man our God in all his fullness and to do it uniquely and ultimately and permanently.

[24 : 12] That's why Jesus could say to people, if you have seen me, you have seen God the Father. And for again, because that is so, it follows that this revelation is truly unique.

It transcends all cultures, all nations, all peoples, because it is the ultimate revelation of God Almighty to human beings. Not just one of many ways to find God.

Apostle Peter said there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved. But because the birth of Jesus takes place in this way as the unique, supernatural revelation of God himself, it means that in the message of Christmas, all the world can know that God can be found, that he can be known, and he can be known by anyone.

Jesus really is Emmanuel. He is God with us. Whatever country we come from, whatever cultural background we have, whatever tribe or tongue or people or nation, he came to bring a saving revelation of God that all of us need, so that all of us can be sure and certain and unequivocal of exactly where that God that we seek can be found, in Jesus Christ.

Whereas the creed says, by whom all things were made, and who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man.

[25 : 59] Friends, this is the truth of God. This is the Christian faith. Nothing less. No myth. No fantasy.

But just sublime and marvelous divine reality. And because it's true, and only because it's true, Christmas means something. It means everything.

Because Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us forever. You know where to find God. And you know how to find God. And you know that when you find God, there will be absolutely nothing un-Jesus like about the God whom you find.

God of God, light of light, lo, he abhors not the virgin's womb. Very God, begotten, not created. O come, let us adore him.

Christ the Lord. Let's pray. Great God and Father, how we thank you that though no one has seen you, though your Son, himself God, the one and only at your side, has made him known to us forever.

[27 : 26] forever. So may we come and indeed adore him, Christ the Lord. Amen. Amen.