

3. It's a redeeming birth - Bringing the wonderful redemption of God's People

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[0 : 00] We've been asking the question this year in our Christmas services, what's special about Jesus' birth? I guess these days if you ask a lot of people that question, the only thing they'd say is, well, I guess he was born at Christmas.

That sounds rather obvious, but actually it's very likely that Jesus wasn't born in December, but in September during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. That's another story altogether.

But the date isn't important, but the fact of Jesus' birth is very important. At least that's what we who are Christians believe.

I recognize, of course, that in Scotland today, for many people, Jesus' birth isn't really all that special at all. It's just an excuse for a midwinter party and a holiday. In fact, I suppose apart from practicing Christians, you're more likely to find honor and respect for Jesus Christ among people of other faiths, perhaps a Muslim background or Hindu background.

More likely to find respect there than you are, I think, from your average Scot today. So there's a good case, really, isn't there, for getting rid of Christmas altogether. Getting rid of the name and everything and just, well, yes, changing it as some people want to, to Winterville or some other appropriate name.

[1 : 25] People get very upset about that sort of thing in the papers. They write letters in, disgrace. It's political correctness gone mad. It's undermining our natural heritage and all that sort of thing.

And, of course, in a way it is. But the strange thing is, often the people who are making those protests are people who themselves don't really believe that there's anything very special about Jesus Christ.

For them it's more to do with nationalistic jingoism. Mr. Outrage from Tunbridge Wells, writing to the Times, you know, that sort of letter. Let's just put all of that aside and keep to our key question.

What is special, if anything, about Jesus Christ? Who is he? And why was he born at all? Well, many, again, would say, of course, he was a very good man.

He was a great moral teacher. He was perhaps even somebody who did give us insights into the divine. But much in the same league as Mahatma Gandhi.

[2 : 28] Or perhaps Nelson Mandela or some other great figure. Someone I heard on the radio said this. He was a political dissident who had no idea at all that he would become so well known.

Well, if that sort of thing is true, then the truth is we can ignore him in the main. We might read some of Jesus' writings. We might take some interest in them, as we do perhaps with the Greek philosophers.

But we're not going to date our calendars by this man. We're not going to waste our time belonging to the church that he founded. We're certainly not going to devote the entirety of our life to him.

That would be a delusion, wouldn't it? As Professor Dawkins likes to remind us. That would be as batty as devoting your life to following the dead Elvis Presley and declaring that the king is still alive.

Well, some batty people do do that. And I'm sure people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and other militant atheists, they would say that Christians are just like that.

[3 : 33] As batty as people who devote their lives to Elvis Presley. At best. And at worst, really rather dangerous and to be suppressed. I can't be sure, but I doubt, I doubt whether in 2,000 years' time, the church of Elvis Presley will still be celebrating his birth.

I won't be around to find out, neither will you, but I doubt it. But it's a fact of history, isn't it? That 2,000 years and more after the birth of Jesus Christ, all around the world, his church is still there and indeed it's growing today more rapidly than at any other time in history.

And that's true, whether Jesus was born in September or December or whenever it was exactly. It's a fact. And the Christian's answer to that fact and the Bible's answer is that Jesus' birth, of course, isn't like Elvis Presley's or anybody else's who's ever been born.

Matthew tells us right at the beginning of his Gospel that Jesus' birth was a royal birth. It brought in the wonderful reign of God's Messiah, his anointed King, long promised.

And he tells us that that birth is a revealing birth. It brings a wonderful revelation of God himself to human beings in the flesh of a unique human being who was God on earth.

[5 : 04] It was a fully human birth. He was born of a woman, born of Mary, Joseph's wife. I don't know if any of you have been watching the BBC's story of the nativity this week.

I recommend it to you. It's very, very good indeed. And it brings home very clearly the human aspect of that story and all the suffering and all that it meant. And Matthew tells us that it was clearly a fully human birth.

But he also tells us that it was a fully divine birth. Matthew's very careful to tell us that Joseph was not Jesus' father. Rather, before they ever came together, Mary and Joseph, in sexual union, she was found to be with child, not by Joseph, but by the Holy Spirit.

That's why Christians everywhere believe what the 19th Creed states so clearly that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.

This was no ordinary birth. It was a wholly unique, revealing birth, revealing God himself in human flesh to make himself known to human beings forever.

[6 : 30] But not only to reveal himself to mankind, he came to do something for mankind. Listen to how the 19th Creed goes on.

He's the only begotten Son of God, 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.

For us men and our salvation. See, it was a saving birth, not just bringing revelation of God's person, but bringing redemption for God's people.

Now, the Creed states that so, so clearly because the Bible states and explains it so clearly. And we can see that with great clarity in these opening verses of Matthew's Gospel.

What we're given isn't just the story of Jesus' birth, though it is that, it's the events and an explanation of what they mean.

[7 : 33] Look at verses 18 and 19. They give us the historical account of the human circumstances of Jesus' conception. Joseph discovers that Mary's pregnant.

And of course, he assumes the obvious. She's had an affair. So kindly, quietly, but no doubt very, very sadly, he decides to divorce her.

But then look at verses 24 and 25 and how that story ends. It is in fact a total turnaround, isn't it? Joseph does take Mary home as his wife, after all.

What could have possibly caused that extraordinary change of heart? He's going to divorce her. Now he's taking her home as his wife. Well, of course, it's the verses in between.

Verses 20 to 23. In which we have God's divine interpretation of what this event means. His voice to explain it all to us.

[8 : 34] First of all, from the mouth of the angel in verses 20 and 21. And then secondly, from the words of Scripture verses 22 and 23. And Matthew tells us that all of this was spoken long, long ago by the prophets.

Now we're going to look tomorrow morning in our Christmas Day service at those words of the prophets. But tonight, I just want to focus on the words of the angel that gives God's explanation about this birth and just how special this birth is.

An angel makes abundantly clear those two things that I've just argued for. First, it's a birth that is truly divine. He is from the Holy Spirit. From God.

But secondly, that this birth is a birth of one who will truly deliver. He will save his people from their sins, said the angel. And that, according to God, is the purpose of his Son coming into the world.

Jesus came so that his people might have their sins dealt with by God. That's how Matthew begins his Gospel with great clarity.

[9 : 42] He ends his Gospel, of course, in the Passion story by explaining with equal clarity the way Jesus would deal with the sins of his people by his own death on the cross for their sins.

If you've got a Bible, you could read the whole of Matthew's Gospel and read the climax of that Passion story. He tells us about Jesus drinking the cup in the garden of God's wrath so that all who trust in him, his followers, might instead drink the cup of salvation that he says is the new covenant in his blood for the forgiveness of their sins.

In other words, what's special about Jesus' birth is that he, the Son of God, became man so that he could die the death in man's place and bring salvation from the penalty and the power of sin to everyone who believes and trusts in him.

It was a redeeming birth. A birth to bring wonderful redemption to all of God's people. He will save his people from their sins.

Of course, that's when people sit up and say, Oh, wait, shut up. Don't give us all that rubbish about sin. There's no such thing as sin anyway. That's not the root of people's problem. It's poverty that's people's problem.

[11 : 13] It's injustice that's the problem. It's lack of education that's the issue. It's the economy, stupid. Sin isn't a very popular concept today at all, is it?

Although it's interesting, isn't it, that when there's a terrorist outrage or a heinous crime, the newspapers do have to resort to the language of sin and of wickedness.

Evil. Wicked. Depraved. Those are the words the judge used of Stephen Griffiths last week, didn't they? The crossbow cannibal as he put him to prison for the rest of his life.

But nevertheless, sin isn't popular. And certainly don't call me a sinner. But you know, nothing much has changed in 2,000 years. The people in Israel, when Jesus was born, they weren't very different from us, not at all.

They, yes, had prophetic hopes for God's Messiah to come, but saving them from their sins wasn't what they were thinking about at all. They didn't want saving from their sins, they wanted saving from Caesar.

[12 : 24] There was another aspect that came out so clearly and very well in the BBC drama. The shepherd wanting liberation from the Romans. They wanted a redeemer to take them out from under the yoke of Rome, from political oppression, from economic oppression, from exploitation.

They wanted a saviour for this world and its problems. To usher in a great period of political and social utopia. President Obama would have had a very grand electioneering campaign in 1st century Palestine just as he did in 21st century America.

Change! That's what everybody wanted then. Tony Blair's mantra, things can only get better, would definitely have had him elected in 1st century Palestine too.

People weren't different then. Well, says the angel, that's not what he's coming to do.

He's not that kind of Messiah. He's not that kind of saviour. Because these earthly issues are not humanity's greatest problem.

[13 : 33] It's not the economy, stupid. It's not just poverty and inequality, awful as they are. It's poverty and inequality,