

A Christmas Message

By the Reverend David W Torrance

A Christmas Message

The meaning and significance of Christmas.

Christmas is, or should be, a very joyful and happy time, not simply for children and young people, but for people of all ages. It marks literally a turning point in the history of the World and is one of the two most important Christian celebrations in the year.

Sadly, increasingly today, many people, possibly mostly women, are saying that they do not enjoy Christmas and are very glad when the Christmas season is over. They feel harassed and under pressure, cooking, catering, buying presents! – and sometimes being involved in family arguments! Christmas has become very commercialised. People are spending more and more. They are buying presents which they cannot possibly afford, plunging themselves and their families into large debts which hang around their necks throughout the year. With its commercialisation, Christmas has become increasingly secular. Increasingly, there are attempts to remove from Christmas celebrations, any Christian reference. It is difficult now in many shops, to buy Christmas cards which have a Christian message. In our multi-cultural, multi-faith society, many Christians almost seem apologetic for their Christian faith and many seem happy to go along with secular society in leaving Christ out of their celebrations.

The lack of enjoyment of Christmas and its secularisation, go together. Happiness, fun, family gatherings are among God's great gifts. Christ said that he came to give us abundant life. God wants us to be happy, to enjoy life and to enjoy partying and fellowship with one another. But we can only have true happiness on his terms, by our lives being centred on Christ.

The purpose of Christmas is that we might enjoy God's gift to us. As Rick Warren, the well-known American pastor and evangelist has said, God's gift to us is unique.¹¹

- It is the most expensive gift that you will ever receive. It is priceless.
- It is the only gift that you will ever receive that will last forever.
- It is a gift that you will use and enjoy every day for the rest of your life.

So what is God's gift? God's priceless gift to us is Jesus Christ and his gift of abundant life - salvation. This is God's gift to the world at Christmas.

So, let us think about the meaning and significance of Christmas. Christmas is the joyful celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ the babe born of Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, 2,000 years ago.

This was no ordinary birth. This was the coming to earth, out of love and for our sake, of Almighty God the Creator of the heavens and earth, the Creator of this vast universe in which we live - this universe with all its mysterious wonders and beauty, with its incredible forces and energies. God created each one of us. God our Creator came into this world that he had created and, in love for us, chose to be born as a child of a human mother. He took our flesh and blood. He lived as a man on this earth, like one of us.

Jesus was the Son of God. In taking to himself our flesh and blood, in becoming a man, he forever remained what he was, Son of God. He was both God and man, yet one person. Our minds cannot grasp nor understand that. As Christians we accept that as central to our faith.

That means that all the time that Jesus lay in his mother's arms or in a cradle, he was holding in life and being, the whole universe. He was holding together the stars in their courses and holding every human being and every creature in life.

The birth of Jesus, the Incarnation as his birth is referred to by Christian scholars, is an astonishing event. Jesus' birth marks the most astonishing event that this world has ever witnessed. It is tremendously important that we keep the startling immensity of that fact ever before us, when we celebrate Christmas and throughout the year.

Why did Jesus, the Son of God, come to earth? What was the reason for his coming to earth? He came out of love and out of deep concern for this created world and above all, out of concern and love for all mankind.

When God created this world, he saw that it was good. It was perfect. Yet this world is not perfect today. There are great natural disasters. There are earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunami flooding, and drought in many areas, bringing starvation and suffering and death. This world is a good thing badly spoiled. It was spoiled, according to the teaching of the Bible, because of human sin. When man first sinned, their sin opened as it were, a floodgate and sin passed over all creation and all creation was spoiled.

Likewise men and women are not today, the people that God intended. They are not what they were when God created them. Their sin of rebellion against God spoiled their lives. Hence we have quarrelling between peoples and nations. We have wars and bloodshed. And we have all kinds of sicknesses and diseases, all because of sin. God came into this world out of concern for this world and out of love for men and women in their suffering.

What did Jesus plan to do by his Coming? He planned to overcome the power of sin. According to the teaching of the Bible, sin, which spoiled the world and spoiled the nature and lives of men and women, is a demonic power. Jesus came to overthrow it, to conquer it and set men and women free. In so doing he also came to cleanse and restore the natural world so that it becomes once again his perfect creation.

Sin has its lodgement in the human heart - in your heart and mine! Jesus when he came to conquer sin, came therefore to conquer it in its lodgement in the human soul. In coming to overthrow it, he came to heal us of all that hinders and spoils our lives. He came, as he tells us in John's Gospel, to recreate us and make us whole, able to enjoy a full and abundant life in fellowship with himself and with one another.

How did he plan to do this? There is much that we do not understand. We can only listen to, and learn to accept, the teaching of the Bible. According to Scripture Jesus deliberately, in his own freedom, surrendered himself to the death of the cross. In becoming man, he drew alongside us. But he did more than that. He actually identified himself with each of us, as we are, and where we are in our sin. He took on himself all our sins, all our weaknesses, all our sicknesses, and died bearing his own divine condemnation upon them. In dying he took them all away and rose again triumphant over death, the grave, the powers of darkness and hell. He lives forever in order, in love, to give each of us a new start, a new beginning, a new life!

So what did Jesus accomplish? When he was dying on the cross, Jesus' final words were, "It is finished!" These words were a shout of triumph. They were the shout of a

conqueror. Jesus had conquered sin and the powers of darkness and hell. He had done everything for our salvation. He offers salvation to each of us as a gift. We can do nothing to earn his salvation. We cannot try and spruce ourselves up and live a better life, in order to earn his salvation. The salvation, which Jesus offers to us, is a gift. It is God's Christmas gift to us! All we can do is to receive it and thank him. Our thanking him is really our acceptance of his offered gift. On the other hand, we can ignore or reject his offered salvation to our own eternal hurt.

When we receive his gift and thank him for it, we receive in Christ a joyful new life - a life of peace and joy in fellowship with God, and the power to live a life of love and harmony with our fellow men and women. When we receive his gift of salvation, Jesus puts within us his Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit comes to live within us. His presence within us is a pledge that we belong to the family of God, that we are able to look up and call God Father and know that we are his dear children. The Presence of the Holy Spirit within us is the pledge, the guarantee that one day we will rejoice with Christ in the Kingdom of Heaven. It is God's guarantee that we will join all the Redeemed of God, our own loved ones in Christ that have passed on to be with him, and that we will live to glorify God for ever.

In our celebrations of Christmas, we should not, and we cannot rightly, separate the Christmas event from all that follows on from it and from what Christ Jesus accomplished, through his Birth at Bethlehem, his life, death, resurrection and ascension. Everything that he did belongs together and contributes to our joy and happiness. He came and did it all for us, for our happiness and eternal welfare. It, all together, makes up God's priceless gift to us.

Truly to enjoy the Christmas event and all that Christ has done for our eternal welfare, it is necessary for each and all of us to receive God's gift. It is to open our lives afresh to him, to pray and in thankfulness to receive him as our loving Saviour and Lord.

What would you think if someone spent everything in their entire possession in purchasing a gift, wrapped it up and gave it to you this Christmas? What would you think of the person who received the gift but never unwrapped it? Never discovered what it was? Never really accepted and enjoyed it? The giver would be desperately sad! God has given his most priceless gift to each of us. Make sure that each of us really thank him by receiving his gift, enjoying it and sharing it with family, friends and others.

This Christmas therefore, endeavour to keep God's gift of Christ central in all your celebrations, in all your family gatherings and festivities. He wants us to celebrate and have fun. Christ is not a killjoy! Happiness is his gift to us, which he wants all of us to have.

Finally, as you do receive God's priceless gift of Christ and his salvation, take time to reflect on the enormity and pricelessness of the gift that you have received. The Almighty God, the Creator of this vast universe, your Creator and Redeemer has come by his Holy Spirit to live within you. All the fullness of God is within you! As Paul said to the church in Ephesus, you have received "every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). Therefore, thank him! Praise him with all your heart and soul!

May all of you, together with your loved ones and friends have a very joyful Christmas -
and a very happy New Year!

^[1] The Purpose of Christmas, by Rick Warren, 2008