

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### The perfect Christmas tree

Presented by Graeme Best

Good morning. Well it's just two weeks until Christmas and I'm sure most of you have your Christmas decorations up. Perhaps you've had them up for weeks. And of course, that will include the Christmas tree. The Christmas tree is one of the most popular and cherished of our Christmas customs. We have them in our homes. We see them in shops and in the city. All beautifully decorated. Many of them with lights. In fact, there would be many hundreds of millions of decorated Christmas trees throughout the world this very day.

It's a funny Christmas tradition isn't it, if you think about it? I mean, what has a decorated tree with presents underneath got to do with the birth of Jesus in a dirty stable 2,000 years ago? Many would say, nothing whatsoever.

This morning I'd like us to reflect on this tradition of decorating Christmas trees and in particular look at what truly is, the perfect Christmas tree.

#### *Song*

The tradition of decorating Christmas trees dates back to the 1500s but contrary to popular legend, Martin Luther was not the first one to decorate a Christmas tree.

However, like many of our traditions, the idea of decorating trees at Christmas time did start in Germany with the earliest record being in a song written in 1521. Now some people didn't like the tradition because decorating evergreen trees was something many pagan religions did - a practice that dates back to before the time of Christ.

Pagan religions saw evergreen trees as a symbol of rebirth. In the midst of a northern hemisphere winter .. with much cold and snow .. and everything else looking dead .. to bring greenery into one's home symbolised life in the midst of death.

The Germans did bring living trees into their homes during the old feast of Yule, where a tree was planted in a tub and it remained in the house for the two month feast. But there is no evidence to suggest that Christians first used Christmas trees to symbolise rebirth, although it makes sense, nor is there evidence to suggest that the Christmas tree was a direct descendent of the Yule tree.

But we do know that the Christmas tree tradition took on and by the early 1600s it was common practice in Germany to decorate fir trees with coloured paper, apples, wafers, gold foil and sweets. Lights or candles weren't a feature until a little later.

Perhaps the reason it took on was because of the tree's connection with what was commonly known as the Paradise tree. From the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Christians put on religious plays called 'mystery plays'. These

plays were performed outside and in churches and one of the most popular of these plays was the Paradise play which depicted the story of creation, Adam and Eve, their sin, their banishment from the garden of Eden ... from Paradise.

The only prop on stage was a tree. The Paradise tree. It was a fir tree adorned with apples representing the fruit of sin and home-made wafers which represented the fruit of life. Later on, candy and sweets were added. The play would end with the promise of the coming Saviour.

You can see the link can't you? It seems the Paradise tree became our Christmas tree.

But of course today, Christmas trees are big business. Most of us have them, Christian and non-Christian alike. And many still want the 'live' trees though most of us opt for the more long-term plastic variety.

Actually I remember when I was a small boy .... we were living in Cessnock in the Hunter Valley at the time ... going out into the bush .... and we would look for and then cut down and bring home a Christmas tree.

And I can remember it had to be the right shape and the right size. I'm not sure what sort of tree it was – probably a small she-oak or something. But you had to have the right Christmas tree. In fact, most people want the perfect Christmas tree.

### *Song*

The perfect Christmas tree. That's not hard if you have a plastic one but when it comes to a live one .. you shop around. Check them out. Pick one that's just perfect. Right size. Right shape. Then you can decorate it and make it look beautiful. Glass balls. Tinsel. Some Christmas lights. Other decorations. With an angel on the top .. or the star of Bethlehem.

A great looking Christmas tree, with all the presents underneath .. it just adds so much to Christmas doesn't it? Almost wouldn't be Christmas without a tree. But it certainly wouldn't be Christmas .. we wouldn't even have Christmas, without another tree .. God's perfect Christmas tree.

The tree by which our sin was overcome. The tree upon which, 33 years after the baby Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the man Jesus .. the Son of God, was crucified.

Is it a stretch to refer to the cross as a tree? Hardly, because this is the language of the New Testament itself.

1 Peter 2:24 says .. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed".

Paul wrote in Galatians 3:13 "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

Therefore, our Christmas tree can be a wonderful symbol and reminder of the cross of Jesus. A reminder of our salvation and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. We must never lose sight of the fact that the angels who announced the child's birth announced him as the Saviour ... and we know that from the beginning there loomed a tree in the path of the Christ, the tree of the cross that would bring salvation to many.

God's perfect Christmas tree is in fact a cross upon which our Saviour died. Like a green tree in the midst of death. A symbol of rebirth. Of life itself.

Can I ask you this morning, just as you have placed a Christmas tree in your house, have you taken Jesus into your life? Have you come to the cross .. come to Jesus and asked forgiveness for your sins?

As you celebrate Christmas this year will you be just participating in a religious festival or will be celebrating the birth of your personal Saviour and Lord?

And so, as we look at the Christmas tree we can find a reminder .. a picture of what Jesus came to do and you know, we discover that just as we pile gifts under our tree; Jesus has given tremendous gifts for each of us that can be found under his tree so to speak.

It is always exciting to watch the gifts appear under the tree every year, and to speculate as to what they might contain. I remember doing that as a child. Feeling them. Giving them a little shake. But how much more exciting to consider the gifts under the tree of the cross.

### **Song**

Under the cross of Jesus one gift we find is the gift of **justification**. Romans 5:1 says "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith".

*Justification is to be declared not guilty. It is a legal term. To be justified in God's eyes is to be seen by God as one who has never sinned. What an amazing thing because we know we have all sinned and until we get to heaven will continue to sin. But our being declared not guilty is a gift from God that comes to us by means of the death of Jesus on the cross because he became sin for us.*

Years ago in California a brother who was innocent was executed for committing murder. Some time later the other brother, overcome with guilt, confessed to the crime but was then told he had no case to answer because the penalty for that crime had already been paid. So it is with Jesus who died on the tree for us. All we have to do is to have faith in Jesus.

Another gift under the cross is **peace**. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ..." Because of Jesus' death .. we can be in the position where we are no longer at war with God. No longer his enemies because of our sin and rebellion. Through Jesus we can have peace with God. This is exactly what the angels were singing about when Christ was born.

Peace on earth. Peace between God and man would now be possible. Isaiah called Jesus the Prince of Peace. Peace with God is another gift that comes to us by means of the cross because through the cross comes reconciliation with God. Romans 5:10 "... when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son .."

Our relationship with God that was messed up in the Garden of Eden can be restored if we but have faith in Jesus' work on the cross.

Another gift is the **access** we have **to God** .. **access to his grace** .. through Jesus. Romans 5:2 "through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." It's like under the cross of

Jesus we find a key that opens the door to uninhibited access to the presence of God. Access to confess, access to worship, to commune, to find rest.

What a beautiful thing. To be able to speak with God one to one. Be able to enjoy a relationship with him .. personally. Pray to him. Have him speak with us. Amazing. But such is his amazing grace that he allows sinners like us to be part of his family. To be his much loved, forgiven and blessed children.

But we also receive **hope** at the cross. Again Romans 5:2 “And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.” Hope for eternity. A sure and certain hope we have a home in heaven. Hope, as Paul says, that does not disappoint us.

Because Jesus died on that tree for our sins, we can know, be absolutely certain, we have a place in heaven reserved for us. Another beautiful gift.

### *Song*

The gifts we buy and place under our Christmas trees are gifts bought out of love. So too with God. With Jesus. Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

And so this Christmas, may it be that your Christmas tree reminds you of the cross .. May the presents underneath the tree remind you of the gifts available to us because Jesus died for us. Justification. Peace and reconciliation. Access to God. Hope for eternity. But again, have you availed yourself of those gifts? Have you come to the cross .. to the tree of life .. of faith?

God bless and have a great Christmas. And don't forget about the Christmas tree. God's perfect Christmas tree. Thanks for listening.