

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The heart of Christmas

Presented by Steve Cooper

Good morning! We're coming close now to Christmas Day. It's a hectic and stressful time - end-of-year breakups, parties, buying presents, family get-togethers, coping with the congested shops and stifling heat. For some people it's a lonely and sad time, as they miss family or friends. In the midst of all this pressure, it's easy to forget what Christmas means. It's meant to remind us of the wonder of the birth of Jesus Christ, God's Son.

In our family we like to keep traditions at Christmas that keep us focussed on the coming of Jesus into the world. We listen to Christmas carols. We attend church, where we hear and see the wonderful story of the nativity. Especially important to me at Christmas time is to read again the accounts of the birth of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Today I want to share with you part of the Matthew's narrative of Jesus' birth, and to ask the question: 'What is the heart of Christmas?'

II

Today we're reflecting on the question: 'What is the heart of Christmas?' Behind all the busy activities and rush, what is the deepest meaning of this Christmas season? Let's look at the Gospel of Matthew (chapter 1), and see what clues he gives us as he tells the story of the birth of Jesus.

Matthew writes: 'Now this is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé, being a just man, decided to break the engagement quietly, so as not to disgrace her publicly.' (Matt 1:18-19) We can well imagine Joseph's distress. He loved his fiancé, Mary, but he was shocked to discover she was pregnant. He could only assume she had slept with another man. What should he do?

Matthew continues his narrative: 'As Joseph considered this, he fell asleep, and an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to go ahead with your marriage to Mary. For the child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'" (Matt 1:20-21)

So the angel conveys God's message, and tells Joseph the name of this child. It's this name and what it means that brings us to the heart of Christmas. The name 'Jesus' was a common name for Jewish boys at this time. It had a definite meaning to Jewish parents: 'the Lord saves'. The Jewish people had waited for centuries for God to intervene in their troubles, to send the Messiah or deliverer who would rescue them from their oppression. They were mainly expecting a deliverer from their political dominance by Roman tyranny. But the angel reveals that the rescue this child will bring will be more profound: 'he will save his people from their sins'.

The Jewish Scriptures had predicted God's future rescue from sin, for example Psalm 130 says: [The LORD] 'himself will free Israel from every kind of sin'. Here is amazing news for Joseph as he ponders his

distressing situation: this child in Mary's womb will be God's agent of rescue and freedom from the greatest tyranny of all: sin. In the birth of Jesus God was fulfilling his promises, by his powerful love and grace. Here is the heart of the Christmas message.

III

Today we're thinking about the heart of the Christmas season. The angel appeared to the confused Joseph in a dream, revealing the name of this child in Mary's womb. 'You are to name him Jesus', announced the angel, 'for he will save his people from their sins.'

Here is the key to unlock the meaning of the Christmas story. In the early chapters of the Bible we learn that the Creator God made everything good. But the first humans rebelled against God's instructions, and asserted their independence from God. This 'sin' brought all the sad consequences of human rebellion: separation from God, broken relationships between people, the tragedies of a fallen world. Without God's rescue, we were in a helpless plight. Only God himself could take the initiative. The announcement to Joseph by this angel shows that God was keeping his ancient promise that he would take that initiative, and show his love and mercy by rescuing us from sin.

The story is told of a young man who was a soldier in the Russian army. He was given a responsible position as paymaster, but he acted irresponsibly and gambled a great deal of the government's money. The man heard that an inspector was coming to check the accounts. The huge debt he owed to the government was about to be discovered. He would be ruined and disgraced! He pulled out his revolver, intending to shoot himself at midnight. He wrote in the ledger these words: 'A great debt! Who can pay!' He fell asleep. That night the czar, Nicholas I, happened to visit the barracks. He read the ledger book, and saw the message: 'A great debt! Who can pay?' He felt a surge of generosity, and wrote the name 'Nicholas' at the bottom of the ledger. When the sleeping man woke, he was shocked to see the czar's signature. He realized what had happened, that the czar had seen the ledger, he knew all. Yet the czar was willing to forgive him. The next day a messenger from the czar brought the exact amount to meet the debt. Only the czar could pay, and the czar did pay!

That's why God sent his Son into our world. Only the Lord Jesus Christ was able to pay our debt to God. We have all failed to love God and people, and we stand under God's just judgment. We know we owe a great debt to God, and we ask 'Who can pay?' The wonder of Christmas is that God sent his Son and signs his name to our ledger. Only Jesus can pay, and he did when he died on the cross in our place.

IV

Today we're discussing the heart of Christmas. What is the deepest meaning of the birth of Jesus the Messiah? The words Matthew records of the angel to Joseph bring us to that heart: 'you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

This announcement points not only to the name of this child, but to the heart of why he came into the world. He will deal with the deepest problem of all: the debt we owe to God due to our sin and rebellion. Jesus would eventually die a cruel death on a cross, bearing the punishment due to us because of our sin. Because he took our punishment in our place, it's possible for us to be forgiven and receive God's pardon. All we have to do is turn from our rebellion against God, trust in Jesus, and receive the free gift of his love and mercy.

In his narrative of Jesus' birth Matthew explains what will happen due to Jesus' paying our debt through his death. According to an ancient prediction in the Jewish Scriptures, Jesus will be given the title 'Immanuel (meaning, God is with us)' (Matt 1:23). The big problem blocking our relationship with God was our huge debt of sin. Jesus came to deal with that problem, through his death in our place. He brought the presence of God to us again. When we commit our lives to Jesus Christ, we experience God's peace and love and nearness day by day. God becomes present to us all the time, he's not remote, but he's always active, sometimes in most unexpected ways. That's what the risen Lord Jesus promises at the close of Matthew's Gospel: 'Be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age' (Matt 28:20).

The saving activity of Jesus will not be completed until he returns to begin his eternal kingly reign. As the apostle Paul wrote of Christians: 'We are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Saviour. He will take these weak mortal bodies of ours and change them into glorious bodies like his own' (Philippians 3:20-21).

The birth of Jesus was the beginning of a long process. In his death he saved us from our huge debt of sin, dying in our place. As the risen Saviour he rescues us in the present from the chains of sin, sustaining us with his presence and power. One day when he returns our mighty Saviour will remove sin totally as we enter the joy of God's eternal kingdom.

V

What is the heart of Christmas? The deepest meaning is the birth of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. The name of Jesus announced by the angel revealed his mission: to 'save his people from their sins'. Joseph woke from his dream, his troubled mind now calm as he knew what God wanted him to do. Matthew writes: 'He brought Mary home to be his wife', and when her son was born, 'Joseph named him Jesus' (Matt 1:24-25).

'Heavenly Father, how amazing is this good news of the birth of Jesus! He came to be our Saviour, rescuing us from a debt we could never pay. He died for our sins on the cross. He was raised from death. He is now the living Lord who delivers us from sin in our daily lives, and who will return as the mighty Saviour for all who trust him. How we thank you, Lord, with awe, and wonder and love, as we ponder today the deepest meaning of the Christmas story. In the name of Jesus, our Saviour. Amen.'