

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Is God unknowable?

Presented by Margaret Hall

Introduction

At this point of the year, just a week before Christmas, very few of us have the leisure to contemplate any questions other than how many presents we still have to buy, how to prepare for an influx of visitors, where to put all the food, and how on earth we're going to fit in all we have to do, especially if we're to be ready for holiday travel as well.

It hardly seems the best time for contemplating the big questions, which rise up to confront us, whether we like it or not – as in times of tragedy, when we ask how the world could ever be rescued from the state it's in. Or in times of awe and thankfulness, as when a child is born, we might ponder again God's existence. If he is there, is it really possible to know what he's like? Or is he, as some religions and philosophies claim, unknowable?

The original point of Christmas was to celebrate the dawning of the answers to those questions – life-transforming answers, which no philosopher could have worked out, and which no one could ever have made up.

I

The events which Christmas celebrates got properly underway when a glorious figure appeared to a young woman by the name of Mary, living in the Galilean town of Nazareth, and engaged to be married. The very same figure had already appeared to an elderly priest called Zechariah some months before, announcing himself with these words:

I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I've been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.

The news was that Zechariah's wife Elizabeth, who'd never had any children and was well past child-bearing age, would have a son. He would be a prophet as mighty as Elijah and would call on people to turn back to God, in preparation for his coming. In due time that son was born, and meanwhile Elizabeth's relative Mary also received a visit from Gabriel.

"Greetings," he said. You are highly favoured and the Lord God is with you." She was very disturbed by this, but he said:

Don't be afraid. You will be with child, and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of God. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David..... and his kingdom will never end.

"How will this be," said Mary, "since I am a virgin?"

Gabriel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and God's power will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

“I am God’s servant,” said Mary. “May it be to me as you have said.”

A messenger from God also appeared to Mary’s fiancé Joseph in a dream, with these words,

Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

On the night Jesus was born, another messenger, accompanied this time by a huge choir of angels, appeared to some shepherds in the fields nearby, with the same message about who the new-born baby was, announcing him as Saviour, as the long-promised King, and as the Lord.

Even with those repeated and dramatic announcements, it must have been difficult to take on board what was happening. The Jewish people knew they needed a king like the great King David, if they were to be delivered from the Roman Emperor’s control over their lives, but could they really be delivered from the power their own sinfulness had over them? Why was he announced as the Lord - the name that had always been used for God himself? How could God, who is one God, and Spirit, have a son? Could the eternal Sovereign over all that exists become a baby? Of course the Creator of the universe can do anything he chooses, but why make the most dramatic of those announcements, not to the nation’s leaders in Jerusalem, but to a few unimportant shepherds in a field?

II

The one thing Gabriel repeated in his message to Mary was that the son she’d bear was the Son of God. Some thirty years later that son would begin his public life standing in the river Jordan beside John the Baptizer, with a voice from the sky saying, “This is my Son, whom I love.”

A year or so later the same words were spoken from a cloud up on a mountain, where Jesus had become strangely bright. Watched by Peter and James and John, he was speaking with Moses and Elijah, who’d died hundreds of years before. Not long after, when Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was, Peter had the answer. He said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

So much that Jesus did and said would be veiled claims to be God – like the commands he gave to the forces of nature and demons and disease, which only one with final authority would dare to give. Sometimes his claims weren’t so veiled. He said things like, “I and the Father are one...As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to whom he’s pleased to give it.” Not long before his death he prayed, “Father, the time has come. Now glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.”

Finally came that electrifying moment when he stood before the Jewish Council, on trial for his life. The witnesses had been testifying, but they were all saying different things, and Jesus wasn’t saying anything. The High Priest was beside himself, seeing his case falling apart. He put Jesus on oath to force him to answer his next question, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the living God?”

“Yes,” said Jesus, “it is as you say.” The Council erupted at such blasphemy, and they condemned him to death.

In life and in death the one and only Son of the Father made visible and knowable the God no one’s ever seen. Being also human he experienced what we experience – only far more pain and pressure than we do. Yet he would overcome every evil, to establish his kingdom of love.

But let’s suppose, for argument’s sake, that Jesus was *not* the sinless Son of God. If he were merely human his death has no real meaning for us, even though he said his death was the price that would set many free. If

he was wrong about that, why should we trust other things he said? His words would have no more power to liberate than any words have had – the words of all the prophets and leaders of religions, who've laid down rules, and berated us for not keeping them, but who cannot offer salvation. They have no authority to forgive us. They have no power to change us. If the history of humankind tells us anything, it tells us we can't keep the rules. We need to be changed on the inside. In the words of Jesus, God's one and only Son, we need to be born again – to become God's children by trusting his Son.

III

The baby born to Mary was also announced as Saviour, and given the name Jesus – God saves. Some might ask, saves from what? – because we do play down the ways we fall short of the love the God of love made us for – love for him and for our neighbour. Just as we know what it is to be hurt, so we've all done things that have hurt others. The God who *is* love will not pretend we haven't, or that if we have, it doesn't matter.

Not long before Jesus' birth, the priest Zechariah said this:

.....because of the tender mercy of our God, the rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.

It's our nature to live in the dark prison of all-absorbing concern for ourselves, destined for eternal separation from the Source of light and life and love. The greatest reason to celebrate Christmas is that God has stepped in, in the person of Jesus, to save us. He revealed what God's love for the unlovely is like, and showed the full extent of his love, by dying in our place.

Jesus sacrificed himself for us – the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, as John the Baptizer described him. His death turned away God's anger against sin, so that sinners could be re-instated into a real relationship with God.

Some people find it difficult to hold together the ideas of a God who is love and a God who's filled with anger. A few months ago on the radio I heard someone say he loved the hymn *How great thou art*, but he stops singing when he gets to the third verse:

*And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in -
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin.*

This man went on to say that in order to stay in love with a loving God, he cannot accept that Jesus' death was an atoning sacrifice – that Jesus was bearing the punishment which sinners deserve and a just God must impose. But that's the very point of Jesus being called our Saviour – that he offered himself as the means by which sinners could be forgiven. He endured what God's justice requires, and so turned away God's justifiable wrath.

If God *isn't* stirred to anger by the destructiveness of sin, he's certainly not loving. His anger shows how very loving he is. He hates to see so much turmoil in the world he created to be good, and to see his loved ones falling so far short of their potential. Any parent watching their child self-destruct can relate to that. The *fullest* extent of God's love is seen in that he himself bore for us the punishment his own justice requires. In Paul's words, *God was in Christ*. God, on the cross, taking the place of sinners who ignore him – that has to be the greatest demonstration of love that's ever been, or *could* ever be.