

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

A reason to celebrate

Presented by Margaret Hall

Introduction

In the run-up to Christmas many people have a great deal to do - extra shopping, putting up decorations, fussing over food, wrapping presents. A lot of trouble's taken, a lot of energy expended. And all for what, exactly?

At Christmas in Australia we celebrate a variety of things - the winding-up of the year, the beginning of the long holidays, families coming together. All reasons to celebrate, but they pale into total insignificance beside the original reason, spelt out in a dramatic announcement the night Jesus of Nazareth was born. It was made to a small group of unimportant people getting on with the job of guarding sheep from nocturnal attack, in the fields outside Bethlehem. When an angel stood before them and God's glory shone around them, they were terrified. But the angel said to them,

"Don't be afraid. I'm bringing you good news of great joy for all people – for you today in the town of David, a Saviour has been born. He's the Messiah, the Lord."

Section 1.

Mary roused herself at the baby's cry and moved across to the feeding-trough. She picked him up, settled herself quietly so as not to disturb Joseph and began to feed her little son, her mind churning through the events of the past few weeks. Actually, she preferred to forget the journey to Bethlehem - how exhausted she was, how anxious the baby not be born on the side of the road. But she could never forget the moment she'd first held him, his little body wrapped in the cloths she'd brought from home.

A strange image from that night was the candlelit faces of those men from the sheepfolds, apologizing for bursting in, but they'd heard a new-born baby's cry and they just had to see him. They were struck dumb - especially, or so it seemed to her, by the sight of the cloths he was wrapped in and the feeding-trough where he was lying. But then they acted like they wanted to wake the whole town. And people came to see what all the noise was about. Soon the place was full and the shepherds were telling everyone what had happened to them out in the fields - how the night sky suddenly lit up and this glorious figure appeared, terrifying the life out of them. He was clearly a messenger from God. He'd said to them, "Don't be afraid. I'm bringing you good news of great joy for everyone. Today in the town of David, a Saviour's been born for you. He's the Messiah, the Lord." They'd know he was telling the truth, he said, because when they went into town they'd find this baby - wrapped in cloths, and lying in a feeding trough!

It was certainly the season for messengers from God, thought Mary. The one who'd appeared to Joseph had also said her baby would be a Saviour. That's why they'd been told to call him Jesus, because he'd save people from their sins. The messenger who'd appeared to her all those months ago had said the baby would

be God's Son, the King God had promised who'd be so much greater than King David, because his rule would be eternal. Mary treasured each detail, every word that had been said. This tiny baby - a Saviour - the Messiah - the Lord. She couldn't really begin to understand it, but if God was at work to put right a world where so much was wrong, she felt privileged beyond words to be a part of it.

As she pondered it all, one thing kept coming to mind - the glory of God. The shepherds had said God's glory had shone all around them. When God's messenger had made his announcement a great company of angels had appeared, like a huge supporting cast, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest!" And she remembered how after the shepherds had seen what the angel had told them they'd see, all they wanted to do was to praise and glorify God.

Mary's thoughts wandered to the future. She wondered how it would all be. But she couldn't have guessed how the good news of great joy announced that night would spread to every corner of the world and still be celebrated two thousand years on.

Section 2.

How could it be, wondered Mary, that this tiny baby could be called "the Lord"? But that's what the angel had said, according to those men from the sheepfolds:

"For you today in the town of David has been born a Saviour. He is the Christ, the Lord. "

But "the Lord" was the name that had always been used for God himself, as long as her people had worshipped him. How could she be holding in her arms the eternal Creator and Sovereign over all that exists? Even if he were to appear like this, and admittedly God can do anything he chooses, why here, where the only place to put him to sleep was a feeding-trough? And how strange that was - the idea of God sleeping ...Or could it possibly be that there's more than one Lord, one God? No, no, never. Mary was Jewish to the backbone and rightly recoiled in horror from such a thought.

But however long she puzzled over all that had happened there were things that Mary couldn't know. Like how the announcement that Jesus is the Lord would come to be seriously misunderstood - how some would think it simply means he displayed many God-like qualities. Others would think his followers believe that Mary had some sort of physical relationship with God. They'd be rightly offended at such an idea. It suggests the term "Son of God" is about biology, rather than about an eternal relationship in the Godhead.

Mary couldn't have known, as she sat holding her baby, how one day, in everything he did, he'd be making a claim to be God - how he'd give commands to the forces of nature and demons and disease, which only One with final authority would dare to give. How he'd say 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." How he'd pray to his Father just before his death, "Father, the time has come. Now glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."

And could Mary have foreseen what it means for the world that her baby was God in flesh - that he would make visible and knowable what no one has ever seen and what no one can know by themselves. That being also human he'd experience what we experience - in fact, far more pain, and far more pressure to suit himself than we do. Yet he would triumph over every evil, and reign forever as the Lord.

Mary's mind flitted back to what else the shepherds had said, that the baby they'd find was the long-awaited Messiah. All those ancient promises about the prophet-king God would send were actually coming true - and through her! This tiny warm bundle snuggling into her had been talked about by prophets going back to Moses - like the promise he'd be like Moses, the greatest leader of God's people. That he'd be like the great King David - descended from him (that was certainly true), and mightier than him, ruling in a way that turned people back to God.

The angel was dead right. It was good news of great joy - for everyone.

Section 3.

"To you, "God's messenger had announced to the terrified shepherds, "has been born a Saviour."

The preacher Luis Palau tells of a Peruvian woman named Rosaria, a terrorist who'd killed twelve policemen. She heard Luis was preaching at a certain place and inviting people to accept Jesus as their Saviour. Filled with bitter hatred she laid her plans to kill him. But that involved checking out the stadium during one of his meetings. That led her into listening to what he said about Jesus' death to save sinners. That led her in turn to ask Jesus to save her. Ten years later when Luis met her for the first time she'd helped plant five new churches and founded an orphanage that houses over a thousand children.

We can see how a murderer would need to be saved from the evil forces she'd allowed to take over her life. But many people don't feel such a need. For them the announcement that Jesus was born to be their Saviour prompts the question, "Saviour from what?"

This is C. S. Lewis' answer to that question:

'There is one vice of which no one in the world is free and which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else, and that is pride or self-conceit. It leads to every other vice and is the chief cause of misery in every nation and family since the world began. It always means enmity, not only between people, but with God. It is the complete anti-God state of mind. In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that and therefore know yourself as nothing in comparison you cannot know God at all.'

When pride drives us to put ourselves first, before others and before God, the consequences are invariably ugly and destructive. Each individual, and the world as a whole, has no greater need than to be saved from the vice at the core of our being.

If we think a Saviour who dies to save us sounds way too extreme, is that because we still think it's possible to impress God with our niceness, or that if he really loves us he should just forgive us? If that's what we think, we're seriously underestimating how our pride destroys relationships. And Augustine wrote that pride makes the soul desert God, to whom it should cling as the very source of its life.

We can be sure that if there'd been any other way to deal with what's destroying the world, the all-wise, all-powerful Creator God would have taken it. Instead he took on frail flesh and died. To us has been born a Saviour.

Christmas can sometimes be a sad time for those who are missing loved ones, but it's far sadder to be missing the real point of celebrating Christmas - that you and I can be saved from our loathsome, destructive pride.

Conclusion

To us is born a Saviour, who is the Christ, the Lord. It's small wonder C. S. Lewis said one of his reasons for becoming a Christian was that it's about things no one could have guessed, and no one would have made up.

A little boy and girl were singing Christmas carols in church. The little boy finished up "Silent Night" with the words, "Sleep in heavenly beans." His sister corrected him: "Not beans - peas."

This Christmas we can correct our misconceptions - that it's all about family and presents and eating. We can turn to Christ to ask for the peace of knowing our sins are forgiven. We can claim his gift of the Holy Spirit with us to light up our darkness. We can plan our Christmas to make sure we enjoy the special celebrations in our churches. Each of us could share a very little of Australia's wealth with the third world's desperately poor. And we can live each day in a way that gives honour to him who was born to be our Saviour. He's the Messiah God promised, and the Lord over all that exists.