

The Christmas Story

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Date: 15 December 2013

Preacher: Philip Wells

[0 : 00] I want to take a few minutes to bring you some thoughts this evening about the birth of Jesus. And then we'll sing our final hymn and we've got some refreshment afterwards so please don't dash away.

I thought we would think about three questions this evening about the birth of Jesus. Three questions, I don't know whether you are asking these questions but maybe some people are asking them. About the birth of Jesus, is it good?

Is it important? And does it work? Is it good? Is it important? And does it work? Perhaps I need to explain the questions but I'll certainly try and bring an answer to each of those.

So first of all the question, is it good? Is it a good thing, this birth of Jesus stuff? Is it a good thing, this Christianity business?

I think if we look through history, through European history, Christian things have been regarded in various ways by various people.

[1 : 09] There have been abuses in the established church and people have said churches corrupt. Church is corrupt. There have been great blots on the history of the church like the way that people who call themselves Christians killed one another.

So even in Brighton we had people who were killed for being Christians. A certain time in history. And in Lewis, the Lewis martyrs have been killed for being Christians. But I think it would be true to say that the general consensus is that even if God's servants make a complete mess of things, God himself is good and right and can take the moral high ground.

I think that's how it used to be. But I think it's more tricky than that nowadays. So people have time to think, well perhaps religion is a cause of wars and therefore religion is a bad thing.

Not just some religions are a bad thing, but all religions are a bad thing. It isn't just that some are worse than others. It's that religion itself is bad.

People might be thinking that these days. And Christianity might be seen as something which is oppressive to various parts of people's lives.

[2 : 38] And that would even be thought in our city here. So my question is, is it good? Is Christianity good? And from the Christmas story I want to say it really is.

It's good. Because the Christmas story is of a God who is radically pro-human. The angels say, I've come to bring you good news of great joy.

Notice what they're saying. They're not saying I've come to bring you bad news. That God has successfully managed to make your life as guilty and miserable and contrary as possible.

It's the opposite of that. He's saying, I really want you to understand that the message that we've got here is good news of great joy.

It's a good, good thing worth celebrating. I don't know whether you've ever read the Narnia stories. Read the Narnia stories and you have the, it was the white witch, wasn't it?

[3 : 40] And she was the one who didn't want good news and didn't want celebration. She didn't want feasts and happiness. Do you remember she made it was always winter but never Christmas.

And it was Aslan, the sort of Christ figure, who was the champion of joy and wholehearted humanness. God is radically pro-human.

Good news of great joy. Peace on earth, said the angels when they were en masse. Glory to God in the highest on earth.

Peace to men on whom his favour rests. That is radically positive for us.

On earth, peace. God has not come to make life more difficult for us. To make life unbearable. But to bring what all human beings want.

[4 : 43] Peace. Goodwill to men on whom his favour rests. It's saying that God has a particular goodwill towards humankind.

And I think that means that this message is a good message. And I can go one step further than that.

And say that the whole idea behind the birth of Jesus is that God himself comes down from heaven to become one of us. And as I was saying to the congregation this morning, God has not done that for any other species.

He's not done that for any other group. He certainly doesn't do that for angels. It's for humankind that God does that. We're immensely privileged. God has taken enough interest in us to become like us.

To become one of us. So I want to say that this is good. And whatever problems we might have about other things and other objections we have.

[5 : 53] Those objections need to be worked through in the light of this overwhelming fact that this is a good message. This is good news.

This is something to be really glad about. It becomes even better as the story goes on. As Jesus lives his life and dies sacrificing himself for us.

That's an immense act of generosity and an immense act of goodwill. So my first question, is it good? And I want to say yes, it really is good. Well my second question was, is it important?

By which I mean, is it worth taking any notice of? Is it worth taking any notice of? Well if there are a hundred people in this room, I can tell you that 4,900 people, because we gave out 5,000 invitations, rather optimistically perhaps, we wouldn't quite have had enough chairs if everybody had come.

But is it important? Well, thank you this evening for making it important enough to be here. There are lots of things that claim to be important. I don't know whether you think it's important to try and get your Christmas cards out by Wednesday, because that's the date by which they've got to go if you're going to a second class post.

[7 : 15] Or whether you think it's important to make sure that the package from Amazon arrives when you're in, so that you don't have to queue up in a huge queue down at the North Road Post Office to collect it later on.

Lots of things that would claim to be important. Saving the planet through carbon reduction, stopping the civil war in Syria, bringing stability in the Ukraine.

These things are important. Where does this message of the birth of Jesus fit with that? And I would invite you to think of what events in history you would consider to be important.

I had a little think about this and found that I... It's quite a difficult question. What are the most important events in history? Like dropping the atom bomb?

That's an important turning point in history, wasn't it? The invention of the wheel is fairly important. You might think the invention of Twitter and Facebook was important. But when you begin to think about it, I don't think that any of those can seriously be as important as the moment that God himself stepped down into human history and came to this earth on a mission to redeem.

[8 : 40] I think that has to rank as truly important. And you remember what the angel said? That this coming to earth was in a specific...

Not only a specific time and place, but with a specific sort of mission. Today in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you.

He is the Lord Christ. That's who the baby is. That's what he's come to do. He's come to save. To rescue.

To redeem. To put wrong right. To mend. And I don't know how much of that chimes in with your own sense of what you need.

But certainly God thinks we need that. And therefore I say, is it important? I think it's absolutely important. Centrally important. Worthy of our best attention.

[9 : 41] And my third question, does it work? Is it good? Is it important? And does it work? Well that's a nicely modern question, isn't it?

Does it work? There was some reports about dieting on the telly a little while ago. And the claim was that diets almost by definition don't work.

Because they work for a little while, then they wear off. And then you have to do the next diet. And that's how they make their money. Because whatever they claim, they never work. So you always

have to go and try again and spend some more money.

Perhaps I'm being a little pessimistic. Does it work? Well, does Christianity work? I suppose it depends what you think it's intended to do.

Does Christianity make people rich? Well, no it doesn't. Does it produce the sort of health and immunity from human ailments and conditions?

[10:42] Does it make a sort of super people? And the answer is no, it doesn't. Or if it does, only in a fairly marginal sense. And it would also be true to say that not all the people who would sign up on the census form to being a Christian, not all of those people really have any involvement with the power of God.

So that you could say that much had changed in their lives. But what I would say is it worked for Mary. It worked for Mary. Because without the power of God, Mary would not have become pregnant.

And by the power of God, by the mysterious and deep and tender working of God, there came a life in her womb, which was the baby Jesus.

It worked for Mary in a miraculous and powerful and personal and deep and life-changing way.

And even, I don't know whether you noticed in one of the songs that we sang, the writer of the Christmas carol was saying, God still works today in a similar way.

[12:00] I'm not saying that he's in the business of producing more virgin births. That was a unique thing and a one-off. But it's sort of indicative of the way God does actually work.

He is able to reach inside people's souls, to reach into the deepest part of our lives, and to bring change and newness of life, to make us new people.

He's able to do that. God does work. Does it work? Yes, God does work. It worked for Mary. And I would like to argue that it would work on the large scale for societies, where you have societies that take seriously the idea of a God who comes down from heaven because he cares about people and is prepared to come in the most sacrificial and lowly way.

And this God is prepared to suffer and be selfless for the sake of other people. It seems to me if you have that embedded in the way people think, that's going to work in the sort of society we have.

And I would want to claim this morning, this morning, this evening, that this works on the personal scale.

[13:31] And I know quite a number of faces here, and I know quite a number of you would say, it certainly worked for me. You would say, Jesus made a promise.

He said, seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened.

Ask and you will receive. And he was sort of making a promise. Think about it as quite a subtle sort of promise. He said, it does work. Because I'm not presenting you something which may or may not work.

I'm not presenting you with just an idea that in practice means nothing. He says, no, no, it works. It works in a sort of involving way. So Jesus says, if you seek, you'll find.

If you knock, and the way the sentence is expressed means not just once, but in a way which says, I really want this.

[14:34] I'm knocking and asking to be let in. Knock and, says Jesus, that works. The door will be opened. Ask, and you will receive.

Yes, it works. And maybe there's somebody sitting here, perhaps you don't often come to church. Maybe this is the first time you've ever been in a church. And you're thinking, I would really like this Christianity thing.

to take root in my life. I don't want to be just paddling around the edges of it. I want to jump into this, up to my neck.

Would it work? And the answer is yes. There is a truth. It can be known. There is a God. He is real. There is a redemption, which is attainable.

Yes, it can happen. God can do it for you. So those are my three questions. Is it god? I say, yes it is. It's really good. It's the best thing ever.

[15:47] Is it important? It is. It's uniquely important. It's on a level of its own, in terms of importance. And does it actually work? To which I'm going to say again, yes, it does.

The God described here, actually does things. He does work. Well, I said at the beginning, there was really something good to celebrate, and I hope I've given you a little flavour of that, in those thoughts.

And let's finish by singing, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, Glory to the Newborn King. So this is a good sing. We'll sing this together.

Would you like to remain standing at the end, and I'll say a closing prayer, and then there will be some refreshments, which are even on their way as we speak. So...