

God and Sinners Reconciled

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 21st of December 2003.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled, God and Sinners Reconciled, and is based on 2 Corinthians, chapter 5, verses 17 to 21.

Well, let us pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for the message of Christmas, and we pray that the words that are so familiar to most of us will strike new notes in our hearts, so that they may resound for your glory.

Amen. I'm not sure if you've noticed in recent weeks there's a secular fight going on in our society to rid Christmas of Christ.

And so you may have read in the local papers, or in the Age or Herald Sun in the last week or two, that the Albert Park carols, community carols, there was a public outcry because they took measures to stop the Christian message being part of that carol service.

[1 : 19] And because of the media and the public outcry as a result of that, they actually reinstated it at their event the other day. In the city of Monash, their community carols forbade any mention of Jesus Christ.

And I was in a discussion the other day about what would I have done if I was asked to give the message without mentioning God or Jesus Christ. Well, thankfully in Manningham, where we are here, we have a high church presence in our community carols, and each of the last seven or eight years I've had a message in the booklet and there's always a Christian message and Christian carols that are being sung there.

And yet it's very ironic trying to work out our society and this secular Christian religious tussle that's going on. Because in our secular cathedrals, what we call shopping centres, we find the Christian message being proclaimed loud and clear from late November, maybe earlier.

Because if you go into Coles or Myers or just walk down the mall at Doncaster Shopping Town, you will hear most days in the last four, five, six weeks, almost ad nauseum, Christian Christmas carols. Statements of clear Christian faith about the gospel of Jesus Christ and the need for humanity to place its faith and trust in him. In the end, you see, you can't take Jesus Christ out of Christmas and think it will remain the same.

[2 : 50] It won't. And so at the heart of Christmas, whoever it is that celebrates it, is Jesus Christ. Now, I think one reason why we still sing Christian Christmas carols in shopping centres and you hear them pipe through their music and yet they're trying to get rid of Christian messages from carols' events is because the Christmas carols that are Christian are so familiar that the words just run off our back like water off a duck's back, in effect.

Yet these are carols that are rich, not only in telling the story of Christmas, but they are rich in statements of the truth about Christmas and the need for us to respond with faith and repentance to Jesus Christ.

One of the best Christmas carols, I think, certainly it's my favourite, was written in 1739, a fair while ago, by Charles Wesley, who wrote many, many, many hymns.

This one was written in the first year that he was a Christian. He'd had a heartwarming experience in London and as a result of that was converted to be a Christian and flowing from that came dozens of carols, hundreds of carols and Christian hymns.

So I guess that in that first year as a Christian, as he faced his first Christmas as a Christian, he was beginning to think anew of the Christian Christmas message.

[4 : 25] And for him as he wrote this carol, it doesn't seem to be simply enough to retell the story like some of our carols do, which is fine, like while shepherds wash the flocks by night, that's just retelling the story almost.

What rather this carol does is tell us bits of the story but more importantly invites us to respond and join in faithful praise of God.

Now the first line of this carol that Charles Wesley wrote in 1739 originally went, Hark how all the welkin rings. Now I doubt there are many of you, English speakers, let alone Mandarin speakers, who know what the word welkin means.

I had to look it up. It means the sky. It's an old archaic word. We now sing, Hark the herald angels sing. Because the hymn begins with calling us to listen.

Hark. What are the angels? Not just any angels, but the angels who are heralding or proclaiming or pronouncing some message. What are they saying?

[5 : 33] Or what are they singing? So Hark, listen to what the herald angels are singing. And then comes a brief summary of their message. Glory to the newborn king.

Now newborn kings are not commonplace. When William was born 21 or so years ago, he wasn't a newborn king. He was a prince. He was called a king to be, perhaps, one day.

But he's not born a king. In fact, it's hardly ever the case, I suspect, in history that anyone is actually born a king. Maybe born an heir to the throne and later become a king, but not born a king.

But the message of these angels, recorded in Luke's Gospel, chapter 2, and brought into this hymn, Hark, the Herald Angels Sing, the message of the angels is glory to a newborn king.

That is, as he comes from his mother's womb, he's already crowned, in effect. He arrives already a king. And then the angels' message is peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.

[6 : 50] Now, here's the hub of why Jesus came. Peace, mercy. Mercy is to forgive, to pardon our sins, our failures, our mistakes, the things where we've fallen short of the standards of God.

God offers mercy, and Jesus is the one who came to bring that mercy. Mercy means that we don't actually deserve mercy. Otherwise, it's not mercy.

Mercy is forgiveness that we don't deserve. And as a result of mercy, we have peace. Peace with God. And therefore, peace with other Christian people as well.

So, peace on earth, mercy mild, and if you like another way of saying all that, God and sinners are reconciled. Now, throughout the story of, or throughout history, what we find is the story of God and humanity largely estranged, and often at enmity with each other, in effect.

God and humanity are a bit like, in history, a feuding couple, a husband and wife who are not getting on, who are sullen and keep their distance, or two warring nations who keep having border spats on their common border, or like disgruntled neighbours who throw things over the fence at each other, but keep a fence fairly high in between.

[8 : 14] You see, from the first people, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden, in the presence of God, when they failed God, disobeyed him, and didn't trust his word, God kicked them out of the garden. And there on history is the story of God and humanity estranged from each other.

God keeps his distance and humanity largely turns away from God throughout the thousands, maybe millions of years, whatever it is, from the beginning through history to the time when Jesus came.

Something is needed to bring God and humanity back together. See, it's not good enough to say, let's just pretend the past didn't happen and start over again.

It's not very good marriage counselling advice and it doesn't work if a couple's feuding or if countries are feuding or neighbours are feuding. That is, when there's a real disagreement and alienation or estrangement between two parties, something needs to occur to bring them together again, to bring about reconciliation.

In the eyes of at least one, if not both of the parties, justice must be done. Maybe some punishment needs to be meted out. Certainly an apology given, but usually more than that as well.

[9 : 36] Reconciliation is needed and God was in the business of reconciliation long before it became a trendy thing in Australian society in the last 20 years. And that's why Jesus was born.

Reconciliation between God and sinners. And as we've just heard in that last reading from 2 Corinthians chapter 5, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself.

For our sake, God made Jesus Christ to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

See, this is real reconciliation because something is done to bring God and sinners together. And what is done is that Jesus comes.

He's not a sinner, but he takes on our sin. He becomes sin, if you like, for us so that our sin is taken away from us to him and in God's eyes we are the righteousness of God.

[10:47] Justice is done because our sins are not just wiped away and forgotten. God doesn't say let's pretend you didn't do it and start all over again. That's no justice.

Our sins offend God. They need to be dealt with. And so Jesus came to deal with our sin, to pay the penalty that we should pay so that we might be righteous and Jesus does that by dying for us on the cross.

Notice in that passage that was read for us from 2 Corinthians 5 it's God who initiates the proceedings. We're the wrongdoers. It ought to be us who begin to reconcile ourselves to God but it's God who reconciles us to himself though he's not in the wrong.

We are. So Jesus takes our sin so that we can be reconciled to God and it doesn't get better than that. And this is not for a select few.

This message of the gospel, message of peace and mercy, the message of God and sinners reconciled is a message for any person of any country, background, any socioeconomic status, male, female, young and old in ancient history and modern times.

[12:07] It's for anyone. The Christian message is an inclusive message for people of all nations, all places, tribes and tongues. Charles Wesley, like the Bible, recognised that.

So in this hymn, carol, joyful all ye nations rise. Not just the people of England where Wesley lived but the people of all nations are to rise, to join together, join the triumph of the skies.

That is, it's not just on earth that we sing the praise of God but the heavenly hosts sing the praise of God with us, with the angelic hosts proclaim Christ is born in Bethlehem. Now Jesus actually didn't begin in Bethlehem.

He existed before Mary got pregnant and made her way south from Galilee to that little village. Jesus existed in heaven, in the glorious heaven of God.

Before Bethlehem, Jesus was divine, part of the Godhead, ruling over all in the skies and he was worshipped by the heavenly host, by the angels and so on.

[13:13] So the second verse goes on to begin, Christ by highest heaven adored, Christ the everlasting Lord. He's been there from the beginning, worshipped by heaven, now at Christmas he's born a human being.

In fact, it's only recent if you consider sort of the span of history of the universe. So you could say late in time to use Wesley's expression. He's always been existing in heaven but only recently, late in time, behold him come, offspring of a virgin's womb.

And the Bible makes it very clear that the Saviour would be born of a virgin. We heard that in the first reading from Matthew's Gospel and that reading itself pointed back to an old prophecy, 750 years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah, that the virgin would give birth and they'd call his name Emmanuel.

So here is God but God is a man and that's what the second verse is on about. Now it goes on to say that Godhead is veiled, veiled in flesh, the Godhead see.

Perhaps the weakest line I think in this carol. It's not veiled in the sense of completely secret and hidden. It's just that we expect God to be full of glorious splendour of heaven but here is God surprising us by being a human.

[14:38] So the Godhead's not veiled so that we can't see it, it's just a bit surprising I guess. Hail the incarnate deity. The word incarnate is it's become in fleshed, embodied if you like.

The deity God embodied in flesh. God, human, brought together in one person, Jesus Christ.

Pleased as man with man to dwell. Not something Jesus did reluctantly but willingly for our sakes.

Jesus, the first time the name is used in this carol, the name that his parents Joseph and Mary were instructed to give him as we heard in that Matthew reading as well.

Call him Jesus because he'll save his people from their sins. Jesus, our Emmanuel, another name that comes from that first reading in Matthew but again looking back to that prophet Isaiah.

Emmanuel literally in Hebrew is God with us. So here's this idea of reconciliation. God and humanity are strange throughout the ages of history but now being brought together and they're being brought together in Jesus who is both God and human, fully God and fully human.

[16:00] There's no better way of bringing two parties together than to have a mediator who is fully one and fully the other and Jesus is exactly that.

Well, the final verse goes on to acknowledge some more things about Jesus. Not really born in Bethlehem but born in heaven. Indeed, in many senses never born.

Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace. Another name for Jesus that comes from the Old Testament again from the prophet Isaiah chapter 9. The Prince of Peace because peace is the fruit of reconciliation.

If a married couple are estranged and are reconciled they have peace with each other. If two nations are warring and they're reconciled they have peace with each other and sinners and God estranged but reconciled in Christ they have peace with each other.

So, he's the Prince of Peace. Hail the Son of Righteousness Light and Life to all he brings risen with healing in his wings. Well, that's quoting from another prophet of the Old Testament in effect.

[17:06] Prophet Malachi at the very end of the Old Testament looked forward to the Messiah who'd be the Son of Righteousness with healing in his wings. And what it's in effect saying is that the fruit of this Messiah who would come is to bring not just physical healing but ultimately spiritual healing so that we're restored to fellowship with God.

Well, these lines at the beginning of the third verse are showing us not just that Jesus arrived unannounced but that he was long expected, long awaited, long predicted.

750 years before by Isaiah, 400 years for Malachi. He's the one that the whole of history has been building up to, that the whole of the Old Testament of the Bible has been looking forward to and then he came in Bethlehem.

And so the final part of the third verse is a statement of praise. Born that man no more may die.

Well, most of us will die but not a death that spells the end but a death that opens the gate to heaven so that we have the gift of eternal life that death will not conquer.

Born to raise the sons of earth, that is, born to raise human beings. A resurrection life, not just the spirit floating on in eternity but as Jesus himself rose from the dead, his tomb empty, he died and rose that we might rise, raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth because being born a human being is not enough.

[18:46] We need to be born again, Jesus' own words in John's gospel that are picked up here by Wesley in this carol. You must be born again, start all over again with God and as that final reading from 2 Corinthians in effect said as well, if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation, they've started again, a new birth if you like.

Well, in 17 1839, Wesley himself was a new creation. He'd been a Christian less than a year when he wrote this Christmas carol we sing so frequently.

He'd discovered new life in Christ and more accurately, he'd discovered that in Christ God had reconciled him to God. Well, I wonder if you can join the praise of all the nations this Christmas.

I wonder if you can sing these words with sincerity, faith, repentance and praise. I wonder whether you can really mean it when you praise God that Jesus has taken your sin to reconcile you to God because we're going to sing that carol now and don't sing it if you don't mean it.

but if you do mean it then sing it with joy and praise with a better voice than I've got tonight as we thank God for Jesus coming to reconcile us to himself.

[20:16] The words are at the end of the booklet and during the singing of the carol our offerings for God's work here and overseas will be received. Thank you.