

God is With Us

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Date: 24 December 2005

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[0 : 00] Well, throughout our great city of Melbourne, conductors' battens have been waving and squeaky violins have been attempted to be tuned, it seems, for week after week at rehearsals for Christmas carol services.

And I'm reminded of the church choir master who'd been trying to put together a Christmas cantata. But every week there was at least one or more of the choir members missing from practice. At last they reached the final practice. At the end of the practice the choir master called for silence and said, I'd just like to say a personal word of thanks to our organist this evening. She's been the only member of the choir who's attended every choir practice for the last three months. The organist looked a little embarrassed and stood up and said, well, thank you, John, it's so sweet of you.

It really was the least that I could do, considering that I won't be able to make it to the cantata tomorrow night. Well, friends, you've made it.

[1 : 08] And it's wonderful to look out and see so many worshipping the one true living God at this Christmas Eve service. And your singing already has been fantastic.

Now, the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. I don't know about you, but I like straightforward statements.

And Matthew, the writer of the first gospel, is nothing but straightforward. You see, in just a few short verses, Matthew describes, in a really straightforward manner, the most amazing miracle that this world has ever known.

And you might like to follow along in this passage if you've got the Bible in front of you there on page 783, Matthew chapter 1. Verse 18, The birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. See, the gospel writer tells us that Joseph and Mary were engaged. Now, of course, a first century Jewish engagement was vastly different to an Aussie one.

[2 : 21] To get engaged at that time meant to be in a legally binding contract. In fact, that contract could only be broken by a certificate of divorce.

Sexual relations and living together, in fact, were not permitted until after the marriage ceremony, and that was about a year after the engagement. And you see, that's why Joseph is actually described as Mary's husband, even though Matthew tells us that they had not had marital relations. So Joseph, described as a righteous man, discovers that Mary's pregnant. He just assumes that Mary has been unfaithful to him. And he gets ready to divorce her.

But seeking to minimize public shame for Mary, he seeks to do that through a private settlement, if you like, an out-of-court settlement. Now, if we were just reading, hearing this account for the first time, we'd naturally be asking, what on earth is going to happen to this young, pregnant teenager? And the answer is straightforward. Because God brings Joseph up to speed with what's happening. an event of the most profound significance for the whole of the human race.

[3 : 51] Of profound significance, indeed, for each one of us gathered here this evening. God sends an angel with a message. Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

You see, the baby in Mary's womb has been supernaturally conceived. The conception of the child is from the Holy Spirit. I mean, not from Joseph.

I mean, he knows that. And not from some other man. And Joseph is called to take a radical new direction.

Not to divorce Mary, but in fact, to go ahead and marry her. And this most special son, this legal son of Joseph, in fact, legally a descendant of David, is to be called Jesus.

A name simply meaning the Lord saves. Well, what will this salvation actually mean? I guess for a young Joseph, he would have been hoping to hear that the Romans were going to be run out of town, out of the country.

[5 : 08] But the emphasis, in fact, is on spiritual salvation. Removing the alienation that sin has created between God and people.

People like me. People like each one gathered here this evening. Friends, this Christmas, in all of the merriment, in all of the excitement, don't miss the significance of Jesus' coming.

He came to deal with sin. He came to deal with our state of being cut off from a holy God.

We've just sung that carol that's loved by so many, young and old, and I'm sure being sung tonight a carol by Candle Light, Silent Night. You know it well as the first verse starts off, Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright, round the virgin mother and child.

And as we were singing that, I was reminded of the kindergarten Sunday school teacher who had a class draw a nativity scene. Anyway, youngster did a really great job and drew the baby and Mary and Joseph and the animals that were gathered around.

[6 : 26] But then the teacher noticed with some real anxiety that the little Jimmy had drawn a rather, well, I guess simply a rather fat man.

And she said, Jimmy, that isn't Santa, is it? Jimmy answered indignantly, of course it's not. That's round John virgin. Well, friends, when we read Matthew's very straightforward account, I want you to notice that actually Matthew doesn't set out to prove the nature of the miraculous birth.

He doesn't do that because it's historical fact. It's reality. See, rather than setting out to prove a miraculous birth, what's important to Matthew is that this miraculous event, in fact, represents the fulfillment of scripture.

You see, this birth is what God said would happen. He said it through the prophet Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah, back in the 8th century BC, in the 7th chapter of the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament, look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel. And in fact, just two chapters later in chapter 9 of Isaiah in the reading that we had earlier in the service, we see that this child is in fact described as the mighty God.

[8 : 11] The child is Emmanuel. The child is Jesus. Jesus. The name Jesus, of course, specifies what he does.

He saves. And the title, Emmanuel, specifies who he is. God with us. God has come.

He's come in person. He's come in person to share our situation. God is with us.

If computer microchips were actually people rather than just pretending to be people, I'm sure they could recount thousands of hilarious stories of people struggling to understand the instruction manual for the latest digital gadget left under the Christmas tree.

Think about it, digital cameras, DVD recorders, home theatre hi-fi systems, GPS tracking devices for four-wheel drive enthusiasts.

[9 : 22] The list of digital gadgets is endless. And so too are those mind-numbing instruction manuals that come with them. When God gave the gift of salvation, he didn't send a booklet of complicated instructions for us to figure out.

God didn't do that. God sent his son. And we of course live in a world where it seems to be commonly accepted that many paths, any path, leads to God.

So I don't want us to miss what Matthew, the gospel writer, says. You see, this is a unique claim. claim. It's an exclusive claim.

God has got through to us in his way. I think we can often fall for the lie that we can find God in whichever way we so choose.

But friends, that is not the message of Christmas. Jesus isn't just another religious figure that you sort of pick up and put on the shelf alongside lots of other religious identities.

[10 : 43] Jesus is God with us. A unique person with a unique conception and a unique ministry and message.

Jesus. Jesus, the one who is both God and human, born through the infusion of the Holy Spirit in a human womb.

I mean, when you think about that, what extraordinary love that God has for each one of us, that he would do this in order to save us from our sins.

friends, don't disconnect Christmas from Easter. They're intimately related. You see, as fully God, Jesus was able to pay the eternal penalty for our sins.

Finite humanity couldn't atone for our sins. And as fully human, Jesus could be our sacrifice, could be your sacrifice, could be my sacrifice, by substituting himself for us.

[11 : 59] Perhaps you've been a Christian for many years, then I trust that this Christmas you'll again praise God from the very depths of your heart, that in God's immense love, he sent Jesus to be your saviour.

But perhaps tonight you've come, perplexed perplexed by the world in which you live, maybe uncertain and fearful of the future, maybe with questions regarding the Christian faith.

Well, if that sort of describes you, then we're delighted that you're here to join in the service with us. but don't leave the baby in the animal feeding trough this Christmas.

You see, the one born as a baby in a backwater town in the Middle East about 2,000 years ago is the ruling monarch of the entire universe.

He is the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ. And he's still with us, dwelling in and with his people.

[13 : 21] So maybe as I even say that, you might be thinking, well, who are Jesus' people? Jesus' people are all who turn from their rebellion, their rebellion of seeking to live independently from God, from their creator, turn from that state and who put their trust in the Lord Jesus, the one who died from on the cross and paid the penalty for your sins.

Jesus the rescuer, Jesus the saviour, Jesus Christ, the King. So may this Christmas be a very special time for each one of you as you gather together with family and friends.

But, but most importantly, may this Christmas be the time when each of you know the reality of Jesus Christ as your Lord, as Jesus Christ as your King, Jesus Christ the King.

Amen.