

Still the Best Good News

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[0 : 00] Well, I didn't introduce myself before earlier, but my name is Andrew. I'm also one of the ministers here. And welcome to our regulars and a special welcome to our visitors. It's great you could join us for today.

What a year. What a year. I wonder, though, what's the best good news you've heard this year? Perhaps it's that this terrible year is almost over.

In fact, Time magazine called it on the next slide. It's a bit small to see in the small print down the bottom, but they call it the worst year ever. I'm not sure if that's quite right, though.

I mean, there was the Spanish flu of 1919, which took the lives of 50 million people. COVID 1.7, sadly, but that's not 50. World War I, World War II. But it's been a terrible year, hasn't it?

But is COVID really over yet? So the end of 2020 is only sort of good news, isn't it? Or perhaps it's the news that we don't have to wear masks inside everywhere, that we still do have to wear them some places, don't we?

[1 : 05] And so even that easement of restriction is only sort of good news. Or what about the good news of holidays? You know, I think you've all got a day off today.

I think you're all here. You know, that's good news. Although with the outbreak in Sydney, plans have been cancelled for some, like myself.

We've got family in Sydney, which we are now not going to visit. So even that good news is only kind of sort of good news, isn't it? It seems whatever good news we've had turns out to be sort of good news.

Good news for some, but not so much for others. And yet I want to suggest that there is some good news that really is good news for all people. It's the news announced that very first Christmas to those certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay, as we just sung.

And I want to suggest that this is still the best good news we'll ever hear. Why? Well, firstly, because it's reliable. Secondly, because it's global. And thirdly, because it's saving news.

[2 : 08] After all, if news is not reliable, then you can't trust that it's good. Can you? A news agency called this year on the next slide, the year of fake news, because there's been lots of fake news going around this year.

But the news announced by the angels is real and reliable. How do we know? Well, because it's grounded in history. Look at how Luke, our writer, begins our passage.

If you've got your sheets there, have a look at verse or sentence number one. He writes, In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for a baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

[3 : 16] She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them. Here are a load of real names and real places.

Did you notice all the names, all the proper nouns there? Verse one, Augustus was the Caesar or emperor of the day. That's confirmed in other history books.

And we know from other history books that he loved his censuses or censai, whatever the plural is. I'm not sure, actually. In other words, this is a real person in a real event in history.

Or verse four, look at all the real places that Luke lists. You know, Nazareth, Galilee, Judea, Bethlehem, all of which you can still visit today. Well, once international travel begins, of course.

Luke also mentions David's name several times in our passage because he also wants us to know, not only that this is grounded in history, but Jesus is from David's house or family line, which is important because David was king of Israel, which means Jesus is from the royal line.

[4 : 23] This is God's chosen king. But the point here is that this event is grounded in history. As we've heard before, Luke doesn't start his account with once upon a time or in a galaxy far, far away.

No, he starts with historical details we can confirm, which helps us to know it's real. And what's more, this event was witnessed by people, the shepherds, who could be interviewed and cross-examined in their day, of course, but no doubt they were.

And Luke's account has survived, not contradicted. Of course, some people might say that the angels make it sound like a fairy tale. But if the birth of Jesus is no ordinary birth, then wouldn't you expect some no ordinary thing?

If Jesus is God's son, supernaturally coming into the world, then wouldn't you expect something supernatural to happen? In fact, if there's nothing supernatural out of the ordinary, then it would actually be harder to believe this birth was special, because nothing special happened.

No, all these historical details, eyewitnesses, even the angels all help us to know that this is reliable news. But it's also global. Have a look at verse 8 to 10, at the third paragraph there.

[5 : 50] And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid.

I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you. He is the Christ, the Lord.

This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Do you notice who the news is for? It's for all people, which by the end of Luke's account means all nations, even us here in Melbourne.

The whole world, this good news is global news. Recently we've heard some other good news of a couple of vaccines that are beginning to be rolled out, both in the UK and the US.

And that's good news, isn't it? But it's not good news for all the people. For starters, on the next slide, people are being warned of the Pfizer vaccine, that if you've got severe allergies, just hold off for a moment, because there's been some severe reactions.

[6 : 58] What's more, while the US and the UK can afford a vaccine, I've heard nothing about the poorer countries. What's going to happen to them? So this good news, and it is good news, but it's not for all the people yet, is it?

It's not global. Or I heard earlier this month about a lady named Jacqueline who was rushing to see her mother in an aged care home. She hadn't seen her mother for a long time because of COVID lockdown, and she had to pre-book a 30-minute window to visit her mother.

But she was in such a flap that she caught the wrong bus, which was going in the opposite direction. When it dawned on her, she broke down in tears and asked the bus driver to confirm her fears.

Is this the wrong bus? But then the bus driver, this guy on the next slide, Alex Bailey is his name, asked why she was so upset. Jacqueline told him the story, and then he pulled over, got up, asked all the other passengers if they would mind if they took a detour, and then drove her in the opposite direction to her mother's aged care home so she could still see her.

Here they are on the next slide, visiting. That's a good news story, isn't it? But as good as it makes us feel, again, it's not good news for all people, is it?

[8 : 25] But this good news is. It's for all the people, including us. It's reliable, it's global, and thirdly, it's saving news.

Have a look at verse 11 and 12 again. He says, You see, this good news is about a saviour who saves.

And not any old saviour, but Christ, the Lord. The word Christ, as you know, is a title like doctor or professor, and it means anointed one. And that is God's chosen king.

And that's why it also calls Jesus the Lord, the king. And as Lord, this saviour, therefore, has the power to save, to deliver, from discord and death and despair, for peace and life and hope.

For those who saw the Carols at Home video that we did as a church last week, I mentioned that there is a virus in the world that's actually worse than COVID. And we all have it.

[9 : 43] It's the virus called sin. Because we've all, at times, ignored God in our lives and not lived with reference to him. And we've all done it from time to time.

And that creates, this sin creates discord, a lack of peace between us and God. I mean, imagine if someone ignores you and rejects you and lives in a way that hurts you.

You're not likely to be at peace with them, are you? Their behaviour creates discord between you, doesn't it? Kind of, they make themselves your enemy.

It's the same between us and God. Now, that may not sound all that bad, but discord with God means eternity without God. What the Bible calls hell.

And if you've ever heard Jesus talk about that, then you know it's no barbecue with your mates.

This is why sin is worse than COVID. But the good news is that today in the town of David, a saviour has been born who can save us from this, from discord for peace.

[10 : 55] And that's why the angels sing in verse 13 and 14, suddenly a great crowd of the heavenly host appeared with the angel praising God and saying, glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace to those on whom his favour rests.

You see, as many of you know, this child would grow up and die on a cross, didn't he? To pay for our sins and to suffer hell in our place.

So we instead can be forgiven and reconciled. Peace with God. As we're singing in our next carol, peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.

No longer enemies, nor in fact just friends. God makes us more than that. He makes us family.

Which means God becomes our heavenly father to help us through life's ups and downs.

You see, this saviour saves us from discord for peace. Which includes, actually, from death for life.

[12 : 09] And from despair to hope. Firstly, from death to life, because our heavenly father will not let death have the final say for his family.

He won't allow it. No, he will bring us home through death to life again with him. And on the last day, he'll raise our physical bodies to be perfect bodies.

To enjoy life eternal in a COVID-free creation. And not only from death to life, but also from despair to hope. Because if you have God as your father to help you through this life, and if you have the guarantee of life to come in the next, then no matter how bad this world gets, there is always hope. Hope to dispel despair. Last week, I conducted a funeral for one of our members. I saw him in the hospital the week before. And he said he didn't fear death.

He said, he said, I'm looking forward to being with my Lord and my fellow Holy Trinity Doncastians. Some of you were here at that service. And we were even able to share some jokes.

[13 : 25] One was from one of his friends who's actually with us this morning. Apparently, he wanted to put a mobile phone in his coffin and ring it during the funeral and say to people, oh, he said he can't talk.

He's flat out. Thankfully, his friend refrained. Thank you, Sean. But they all knew it was you. But the point is, he did not fear death.

Why? Because he had certain hope. Unlike others I've seen who didn't know Jesus, so did despair at their disease or their pending death.

yet this good news is that Jesus can save us from all that, from discord, death, and despair, for peace, life, and certain hope.

This is saving news. time magazine recently He also named the person of the year on the next slide, as both Joe Biden and Kamala Harris.

[14 : 29] Now, despite the fact that time doesn't seem to know what the word person means, one person, not two, Joe Biden, I'm sure he's a lovely man, but he hasn't done a whole lot yet, has he? Yet time is effectively holding him up as the saviour of the states.

But Jesus has done a whole lot. By his death, he is the saviour of the world. This is reliable news, it's global news, it's saving news, all of which makes it still the best news we'll hear.

And so how will you respond this morning? The shepherds give us some clues, have a look at verse 15 and 16 there. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who is lying in the manger. Here the shepherds go and see for themselves, don't they? To see if it's true, if they can believe it.

For this news is worth seeing. And when they saw, at the end of verse 20, which we haven't read yet, but right at the end of the passage, it tells us that they found things just as they had been told. [15:55] There was a baby in a manger, which remember was unusual back then too. A manger, of course, was a feeding trough for animals.

It would be like coming home from the hospital and going, where shall we put baby Johnny? Oh, the dog bowl looks about the right size. Plonk. That would be unusual. You'd get in trouble actually, I'm sure. That's what it was like.

It was unusual. That's why it was a sign to the shepherds that they had the right baby. That this particular one with an unusual cradle would be their saviour king.

But the point is, this news is worth seeing for yourselves because it is good news. And so if you're here today and not yet a Christian, why not see for yourself?

Investigate the evidence or read the rest of Luke's account. I actually have some free copies of Luke's gospel and it gives you a very brief one-page intro at the beginning and a couple of things at the end.

[16:58] I've got some free copies if you'd like to take one today to investigate, to see for yourselves. And for us who have seen for ourselves and have seen that it's worth believing, then the shepherds show us our next response in verse 17 and 18.

It says, When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

You see, this is such good news. It's not just worth seeing for yourselves. It's also worth sharing with others as appropriate. That's why we work so hard and actually spend a fair bit of money producing those carols at home programs that we did last week.

And we gave out those show bags and so on to give you an opportunity to share the good news with neighbours or friends or family. That's why if you give Christmas cards to work friends or relatives or neighbours, it's worth using Christian ones rather than Santa Claus ones, as nice as those are.

Because this good news is worth sharing. After all, it's good news for all the people, isn't it? And finally, it's good news worth praising.

[18:14] Have a look at verse 19 to 20, the last two verses there. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Here, Mary ponders and the shepherds prays. After all, as I said, this is, on the next slide, good news of great joy for all the people.

But I also know for many of us who've been Christians for a while, who've even, you know, come to Christmas year after year and hear the same story, this good news can become so familiar to us, we forget how good it is.

That it's still good news of great joy worth praising God for. I do that myself. In fact, we often do it with lots of things.

We become so familiar, we take them for granted, even COVID actually. I heard someone say that the outbreak in New South Wales was a bit of a wake-up call for us here in Victoria because, according to this article, many had started to become so familiar with it that we started taking it for granted.

[19:29] But we can do that with this good news too, can't we? So why not do as Mary did, pause and ponder. Ponder what you'd lose without this good news.

We'd lose peace, life eternal, and with it, certain hope. With that, we'd also lose assurance, contentment, knowing that there's a world to come that will more than make up for anything we miss out in this world.

And even joy in hardship, knowing that God is with us, helping us through it. We'd lose all of that. It doesn't take long to see how good this good news still is, does it?

So why not ponder afresh yourself today, this news, then do as the shepherds did. Praise God. Pray and thank him for this great news announced that very first Christmas.

As I suggested a couple of weeks ago, when you sit down to Christmas lunch or dinner today, whatever you're doing, in my case it's lunch, I could smell the roast cooking almost from here actually.

[20 : 42] Why not pause and ponder? And then praise God, thank God, not just for the food and those who cooked it. Thank you, wifey. But thank God for Jesus and this good news announced that very first Christmas.

Let's do that now. Let's start. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you that the good news announced that very first Christmas is still the best good news we'll hear.

It's not sort of good news, but it's good news for all people and it brings great joy because it is reliable news, it's global news, and it is saving news.

Father, we praise you for it and we pray that you would help us never to forget it. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.