

The Birth of Peace and Hope

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[0 : 00] That wasn't tricky. You did really well. Well done. For those who don't know me, my name's Andrew. I'm one of the ministers here. And can I add my wishes to you? Merry Christmas.

It's a very exciting day. I've even got my Christmas socks on. So it's all happening. But I wonder what you wanted to get for Christmas this year. Some children wrote to Santa about what they wanted for Christmas.

Christmas. This first kid says, Dear Santa, how are you? Well, enough chit-chat. Let's get down to business. This year I want a big space Lego set, some jelly beans, a shark's jacket, a hat, an AK-47 assault rifle?

Are you kidding me? A Nintendo game. I'm a bit worried about this kid. This next one, though. Dear Santa, I would like... I'm not reading that. That's a huge list. Look at all that.

Which is not as bad as this next one, though. So, Dear Santa, you better bring my pony this year. And notice the bottom left-hand corner there. Or there will be consequences.

[1 : 07] My daughter, we asked one of our daughters what she wanted for Christmas. And she texted my wife, and this is what she said. Christmas list, a dog. An animal, which is a dog. *Canis lupus familiaris*, which is a scientific name for...

A dog. Yeah, at least you can add the bit about no consequences. But after the year like we've had, I wonder if, like me, you just want a bit more peace in our world.

It's gotten to the point where people are weary from hearing bad news. In fact, the news seems to be weary of reporting it. When was the last time you heard what's going on in Ukraine? Seems to have disappeared from the news, hasn't it?

But our weariness of hearing bad news is nothing compared to those people who are living that bad news, is it? And so for those still held hostage or living in Gaza, Ukraine, or persecuted in South Sudan, what they'd really want for Christmas, I'm pretty sure, is peace.

Isn't it? Well, today we're going to look at the end of the Christmas story, which doesn't get covered often. Last year we looked at the first part of Matthew chapter 2 about the wise men.

[2 : 19] Not that I expect you to remember that. I don't even remember that, actually. That's why we included that in our readings. But you know the general gist of what happened, don't you? The magi or the wise men visit Jesus and they give him not a dummy or a nappy or a onesie, but gold, frankincense and myrrh, which are expensive gifts, right?

I mean, gold at the moment is trading at over \$10,000 per 100 grams, so per kilo that's over \$100,000. That's pretty expensive, right? But that's the point.

These were gifts fit for a king. The wise men even bowed down and worshipped Jesus as a king. But that's often where churches stop the story.

What happens after they leave? Well, let's pick it up in your handouts down the bottom in the last paragraph at point 1 and verse number 13.

Chapter 2, verse 13. When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt.

[3 : 28] Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him. And so Joseph got up, took Jesus and his mother Mary during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod.

And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet, Out of Egypt I called my son. And now there are a few Herods in the Bible. It's easy to get mixed up with them. This was Herod the Great, so named for his great building projects.

But he was also known as Herod the Paranoid. He was paranoid that he would be replaced as king. So much so that historians think by this time of Jesus' birth, he'd already killed his wife and two of his sons, just to get rid of any competition.

And so when the wise men don't come back to tell him where Jesus was, because now he wants to kill Jesus, look at how he responds in verse 16.

When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity, just to make sure, who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

[4 : 46] Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament was fulfilled. A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more.

Here is the slaughtering of infants and the crying of Bethlehem parents. Merry Christmas everyone, aren't you glad you came this morning? You can see why this part of the Christmas story is not often covered, can't you?

And yet, sadly, it's something we can relate to. We know loss and mourning in our own lives, don't we? And we certainly know it in our world.

I mean, I'm guessing you heard just last week of the shooting in Prague at the university. And it was only a couple of months ago, in October, when Hamas attacked Israel.

I know of people who were there in Israel that day and they are still traumatised by it. And now there's growing anti-Semitism. It's horrific. And now it's horrific for the Palestinians left in Gaza, isn't it?

[5 : 53] And despite cause for another ceasefire, fighting continues. There was even a protest at the Carols by Canon light last night. I don't know if you heard about that. It's horrific for both sides today, just as it was horrific for those Bethlehem parents in Jesus' day.

And Matthew says this was a fulfilment of an even earlier day, back in the Old Testament, when Israel was taken away. If you have a look in verse 17 again, it says, this was then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah.

So we're talking in the Old Testament times, was fulfilled. A voice is heard in Ramah, which was the location the Israelite captives were assembled before they were taken away to an enemy country, to Babylon in exile.

Rachel weeping for her children. Rachel is often considered to be the mother of Israel. And so here is Rachel weeping for her children Israel as they are carried off into exile and they are no more in their land.

And yet despite how unhappy this is, point two, it's still worth considering at Christmas because behind it, there is peace and hope, which brings joy.

[7 : 20] You see, Matthew is writing primarily to people who knew their Old Testament. And so they knew the very next verses in Jeremiah spoke of hope and peace.

We heard part of it in our reading where we heard that they will return from the land of their enemy, from Babylon. So there is hope for your descendants, declares the Lord.

There is hope. And this hope would include a future peace. For a few verses later, Jeremiah goes on to say that people will live together in peace, that is, in Judah and all its towns, farmers and those who move about with their flocks.

And God says, I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint. You see, in the midst of fighting and mourning, God promised peace and hope.

The hope of returning to a land where there will be no more fighting or mourning, only people living together in peace, refreshed and satisfied in life.

[8 : 32] Is it not what our world needs? Is it not what we want? You know, the good life, peace, refreshment, satisfaction? And so as Matthew looks back, he not only sees the tears of those Bethlehem parents fulfilling the tears of Rachel in Jeremiah, he also knows of the peace and hope God promised through Jeremiah, which Jesus will bring.

How? Well, because of what Matthew said a chapter earlier. Just before our New Testament reading, Matthew writes in chapter 1, verse 21, that she will give birth, that is, Mary will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus, which means the Lord saves, because he will save his people from their sins.

You see, sin is the root cause of problems in our world because it's about ignoring God in his loving way, even when it's good for us. I mean, is not loving better than hating?

And is not forgiving better than fighting? And yet we often think we know better than God, don't we? I have three teenagers, so I can relate to this sign that says I have no need for Google.

I have teenagers that know it all. I don't know if you can relate to that as well, but of course I was the same when I was a teenager. And when it comes to God, we are all like that at times, don't we?

[10 : 02] We are all at times think we know better than God. And so we ignore God and live our own way instead. And the problem with this is that it leads to fighting, which causes mourning.

I imagine if we're all living our own way, doing what we want, and then two people both want the same TV remote. What happens then? Or two people in a shopping centre want the same car parking spot.

I saw a horrific incident of road rage last week, actually. Or in Herod's case, what happens when you want to get rid of the competition? Or in Hamas and Israel's case, you simply want to get rid of each other.

You see, sin leads to fighting with people, which causes mourning. And what's more, it leads to rejecting God, which causes judgment. I mean, to ignore the God who made us, especially when He wants what's good for us, is to dishonour Him or mistreat Him as, well, God.

We're all horrified when we see people mistreated, aren't we? And we want those responsible to be held accountable. Or how much more so with God when He is mistreated?

[11 : 18] And so since God is just, then He must hold us all accountable one day, both for how we've treated Him and for how we've treated one another. And that will mean judgment.

It's why Israel first went into exile because of the way they treated God or mistreated God in each other. And yet this Jesus, whom the wise men worshipped, is named Jesus, again, because He will save His people from their sins, from that judgment, from that punishment.

For He grew up and at the cross He took our judgment in our place so that we can be saved from it, so that we can be forgiven and given peace with God instead.

And here's where we begin to see peace on earth. In a while we'll sing that famous carol, Hark the Herald, and the first verse talks about peace on earth.

But notice how it goes on to describe that peace. God and sinners, what? Reconcile. Peace. And then once we have peace with God, then more peace follows.

[12 : 34] It all starts with peace with God because it deals with the root problem of sin, you see. And so peace with God will lead to peace within us, knowing that God is with us as our Heavenly Father to help us and strengthen us through life's ups and downs.

I was speaking with someone from our church recently who was undergoing significant surgery, and they were not worried about it. In fact, as they were wheeled into the operating theatre before they were put under with the anaesthetic, they had a sense of real peace, knowing that God was with them, He was in control.

And they said, even if they didn't make it off the table, they knew where they were going. And so they had that peace. You see, peace with God led to peace within them. Peace with God also leads to peace with each other.

For all who believe are brought together as one family. We are given this underlying inherent bond of peace with each other. It's why you can travel overseas and then you can meet someone and suddenly you find out that they're a Christian and there's this instant connection.

Have you ever experienced that? It's because we have a bond of peace. Of course, Christians can sometimes forget this bond we have and fight instead, kind of like families sometimes do.

[14 : 00] But peace with God means we have a bond of peace with each other that we can enjoy now. And peace with God also leads to the hope of complete peace on earth later.

In Jeremiah's language, the hope of returning to a land where there'll be no more fighting or mourning, only everyone living together in peace, refreshed and satisfied in life.

The last book of the Bible actually gives us a picture of this. It speaks of a new heaven and a new earth and no longer any sea. I used to surf when I was younger and fitter and so I was quite disappointed when I first read this verse about no longer being any sea but in the book of Revelation there's lots of symbolism and the sea is a symbol for evil and so it's really saying there'll be no more evil like fighting or killing.

Instead there will be people gathered together as the new Jerusalem it says and God himself will not only live with them but refresh and satisfy them.

The way this puts it he will wipe every tear from their eyes. it's refreshing satisfying there'll be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away and only the good will remain.

[15 : 28] Here is the certain hope of complete peace on earth fully refreshed and satisfied in life but it all starts with peace with God made possible by the birth of Christ.

Remember he was born to save us from our sins to reconcile us to God and then once we have that all the other peace follows within us and between us now and a certain hope of complete peace later.

And that's why we sang before that carol which I thought you did very well with but the carol says a thrill of hope the weary world rejoices.

Why? Well for yonder breaks a new and glorious morning. That is the birth of Christ brings a new and glorious morning for with his birth comes peace and hope for our weary world.

I don't know what you wanted for Christmas this year hopefully it's not an AK-47 but Jesus offers you peace and hope in this world of fighting and mourning and it all begins with peace with God and if you'd like to know this peace then you simply need to believe in Jesus.

[16 : 58] Trust in him and his death to pay for your sins and reconcile you to God. And so can I ask do you believe in Jesus? Do you trust in him as your saviour and king?

And for us who do then firstly pray for peace in our world this Christmas and even more than that pray for people to know Jesus who gives peace now in part and guarantees it in full later.

And so firstly pray and secondly rejoice. I mean I know this part of the Christmas story is heavier than the rest and often what we hear and I suppose we could ignore what's happening in our world and not think about those living in it but I think it's far better to acknowledge the reality of it and then look to Jesus who gives peace and hope through it.

Last week I read an article that said that the church in Bethlehem in the West Bank have cancelled their world famous Christmas celebrations because of the ongoing war.

They seem inappropriate given all the suffering and yet many Christians are still rejoicing at Christmas not loudly with festivity no but quietly with sincerity with deep joyful gratitude for Jesus.

[18 : 33] In fact one church changed their nativity scene and put Jesus not in a manger but a pile of rubble and put the wise men and the shepherds around the outside in those dark figurine shapes and the point the church was trying to make that even in the midst in the middle of this horrific war for both sides the birth of Jesus holds out real peace and hope for those who come to him and so if they can still rejoice not loudly with festivity but quietly with sincerity then certainly we can rejoice and even loudly we can still sing joy to the world later even in the midst of our own personal mourning now or even in the midst of our world's suffering for the birth of Jesus holds out real peace and hope for all of us who have come to him so let's pray now and then we will rejoice in a moment let's pray our gracious father we thank you so much for the birth of the lord jesus and we thank you that he was born to save us from our sins that we might be reconciled to you and having peace with you all the other types of peace follow peace within us and between us now and the guaranteed peace in full later and so far we do pray for our world please bring peace to those places that need it and please father help people to know jesus and the peace and hope he offers help us to rejoice in him this christmas in his name we pray amen god in we pray and we are we we can