

Shining the light on Christmas

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[0 : 00] I'm getting applause for reading it. Surely you get an applause for preaching it as well at the end. So at the end, maybe. We'll see.

Let me just start by kicking off that I'm just so grateful for all of those who contributed to decking the halls here at St Paul's. It looks fantastic, the building, to walk in here and to lift the spirits after a difficult year, but also to walk around.

I'm particularly grateful because I live here, and so I get to see all this stuff lit up each night. So if you want to come up and really enjoy it, just wander around the place at nighttime.

It just really lifts the spirits. So well done to everyone who's contributed to that and to the working bee as well. It is a time of celebration.

I think the lights and everything sort of puts that into it. And so I want to dive into, I think, the most exciting of Christmas texts, and that's what you have in front of us in the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel.

[1 : 07] So if you'd like to get your Bibles open to Matthew chapter 1, and we're going to dive into this. There are three things that I want to see this morning from this list of names. And this is on your St. Paul's app.

If you've got the St. Paul's app for a bit of an outline, we'll take some notes. Number one, Christmas is good news, not good advice. Secondly, Christmas turns our values upside down in this world. And thirdly, Christmas is the promise of ultimate rest. And so really, the title for today's talk is Shining Light on Christmas Rest.

Shining Light on Christmas Rest. So firstly, Christmas is good news, not good advice. Now, what we notice at the beginning of Matthew 1 is that it doesn't begin with once upon a time.

You see, that's how fairy tales, that's how legends, myths all begin, once upon a time. Once upon a time sends the signal that what we are currently engaging with probably didn't happen.

[2 : 12] Matthew begins very simply, this is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. So what Matthew does right at the very beginning of his Gospels, he grounds who Jesus is and what he does in history, in extensive history.

Jesus is not a metaphor, he is real. The biblical accounts of Christmas are what actually happened in history. The birth of the son of God into the world is a gospel, it's a good news, it's an announcement for all of the world.

The birth accounts of Jesus are not telling us what we should do, but what God has done in history for us.

Jesus is the Messiah, the son of Abraham. You see, central to Abraham, God made a promise to Abraham that all the people of the world would be blessed through him.

through a descendant of Abraham, God would reverse the devastating impact of sin and rejection of God for all time and eternity for all people.

[3 : 36] And Matthew declares that in Jesus, this time has come. He's also declared here to be the son of David.

God promised, extended that promise to Abraham and said to David in 2 Samuel 7, that one of your descendants, David, will sit on my throne and rule all the universe forever.

And so what we have here is these threads through the Old Testament connecting promise to the covenant promise of David right through until we see here, this is it.

The moment has arrived. After 400 years of not hearing a sound of revelation from God, Jesus bursts on the scene and God speaks.

The time has come. The silence is over. That's what makes this good news. Jesus is the Messiah.

[4 : 37] Jesus is the fulfillment of God's thousands and thousands of years of plan of salvation. And the heart of the Christian gospel is that you do not save yourself.

God came to save us in the person of Jesus on that very first Christmas night. You see, Christmas tells us that Christianity is unique.

All other religions and philosophies of life give advice. The founder of the great religions come along and say something like, do this, do that.

I'm here to show you the way to spiritual reality, to enlightenment, to salvation. Do all these things and you will follow the path to salvation. That's advice.

And some of the advice is quite useful. Christianity is not primarily about self-improvement. We begin with Jesus not by adopting an ethic, not by turning over a new leaf, not even by joining a community.

[5 : 52] We begin by believing the report about what God has done in history in the person of his son Jesus. Did God really become a human being?

Did Jesus really live and suffer and die as a sacrifice for all of humanity? Did he really rise triumphantly from death to live forever and rule forever?

You see, Christmas shows us that Christianity is not good advice. It's good news. It's a pronouncement. It's a proclamation. Secondly, we see here that Christmas turns all of our values upside down.

We live in an individualistic culture where we commend ourselves through performance and through accomplishments. I had this awkward interaction with someone recently, a gentleman recently who has done fairly well in life, but I never asked him what he's done in life.

And he was so self-absorbed, he didn't know what to ask me what I did in life. And so all we had was this surface conversation because I refused to jump into the conversation about what do you do?

[7 : 18] Who are you? And so the conversation went nowhere. Absolutely nowhere. If I'd opened the door, I knew him well enough to know we could spend an hour just talking about him and what he's accomplished in life.

That's what we do in individualistic culture. That's not how it worked in the first century in the Middle East where these events were taking place.

A family tree operated like a resume in the first century. That is, your heritage, your clan, your family, your pedigree constituted your resume.

And as they do now, as we do now, people adjust their resume to leave out the parts that might be embarrassing or a little less impressive.

Most of us in our 40s or 50s do not put our first job on our resume. Turning burgers at Maccas, cutting weeds in a cotton field.

[8 : 34] And what we know is in the first century, Herod the Great eliminated many names from his public genealogy because he did not want anyone to know that those embarrassing people were associated with him.

It's like the story I heard once upon a time where the children of a prominent family were assembling a book of the family's history as a birthday present for the family patriarch.

They commissioned a professional biographer and were careful to warn this professional biographer of the black sheep of the family and they needed to do something about the black sheep. Black sheep problem was a guy named Uncle George.

Uncle George was a convicted criminal. He'd been executed in the electric chair for murder. And the biographer assured the children of the family that he could handle the situation so that there would be no embarrassment brought to the family.

And so this is what he wrote about Uncle George. Uncle George occupied a chair of applied electronics at an important government institution. He was attached to his position by the strongest of ties and his death came as a real shock to everyone.

[9 : 54] We tend to do that in our lives, don't we? We cover over the skeletons in our closet if you like. We do it because we suspect that people will value us less if they knew the true us.

Warts and all as we say. And so it's quite surprising that in a culture where you just did not do this, Matthew does the exact opposite with Jesus.

Doesn't cover over the skeletons in the closet at all. And it helps us to see that God's value system is radically different than ours. First of all, I want you to notice that there are five women listed in this

list of this genealogy.

In ancient patriarchal societies, a woman was virtually never named in a list like this unless they were quite literally a queen.

Let alone to have five of them. Women were gender outsiders in those cultures. They had no legal rights. They couldn't inherit property.

[11:10] They couldn't give testimony in court. And yet they are here named in Jesus' genealogy. And what's more, three of the five are Gentiles.

Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. To the ancient Jew, these women are regarded as unclean Gentiles. They were not just gender outsiders, but these are racial and religious outsiders. And yet Matthew deliberately includes them in the family tree of the long awaited Messiah of the world, the Jewish Messiah.

And by including them, Matthew recalls some of the most sordid, nasty, immoral occasions in the Bible.

It says in verse three that Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah and the mother was Tamar. Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law and she tricked him into sleeping with her.

[12:21] It was an act that was against the law of God. And even though Jesus was a descendant of Perez and not Zerah, Matthew includes them both.

and both Judah and Tamar so that we remember that whole sordid story.

The saviour of the world came into the world into a dysfunctional family just like yours and mine. And remember Rahab? Rahab? Mentioned in verse five, just a Gentile, she was a prostitute. But the most interesting story is in verse six, it mentions King David, royalty in the family tree and you go, woo, that's fine, good stuff.

Except in one of the most, I think one of the great and ironic understatements of the Bible, Matthew adds here, it was the father of Solomon and whose mother had been Uriah's wife.

[13:40] Her name was Bathsheba. And by not naming her and mentioning instead her first husband Uriah, Matthew is again calling us to recall a terrible and a tragic and assorted chapter in Israel's history.

King, the greatest blot on great King David's name. Before he was king, David was a fugitive running for his life from King Saul.

And a group of 37, just 37 loyal men went on the run with King David against Saul and all the might of the kingdom.

And they put their lives on the line to protect David. They would do anything for David. And Uriah was one of them, 2 Samuel 23.

And when David was finally made king from his palace roof, he saw Uriah's wife and he wanted her and he took her. she got pregnant and then he arranged to have Uriah killed so that he could marry her and cover up the whole sordid thing.

[15:02] And it was out of this dysfunctional family and this deeply flawed man that the saviour of the world came. So this list of names here includes moral outsiders and cultural outsiders and racial outsiders and gender outsiders rather than being excluded or covered up or covered over.

They are publicly acknowledged as ancestors of the perfect Jesus Christ. It's such an unusual genealogy.

Why did Matthew include it? He didn't have to include all these details, so why did he deliberately include it? There's a verse in the Bible that gives us a clue.

It's 2 Corinthians 5 verse 21. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him, talking about Jesus, we might become the righteousness of God.

The saviour of the world jumped right into the middle of evil, unjust affairs of human existence sin. He jumps into the quick sand in order to pull us from it.

[16:26] He identifies with our weakness and our brokenness to rescue us out of it. The Christian message is that if you repent and you believe in Jesus Christ, he unites you with him and all of his saving work and all of its benefits for eternity.

There is not a single great individual who doesn't need his grace and there is not a single rotten individual who can fail to receive his grace.

Every gift that we give and we receive at Christmas are symbol of the greatest gift of all, God's grace to us in Jesus Christ.

Now as James mentioned last week and you've got to repeat it because it's just so good. Some gifts by their very nature just cause you to swallow your pride and hopefully you won't necessarily receive one of these this Christmas but you know a book titled Ten Easy Steps to Lose Weight for instance or another book titled Overcoming Selfishness you receive those kind of things that just can't help but you know highlight your flaws or cause you to admit your weaknesses or that you need help in some kind of way and the message of Christmas is such a gift. The message of Christianity is that there has never been a gift offered that makes you swallow your pride to the depths of the gift of Jesus Christ requires us to. [18:12] Christmas means that we are so lost we are so unable to save ourselves that nothing less than the death of the Son of God himself could not save us.

To accept the Christmas gift we must admit that we are sinners we are unworthy of the gift and in need of saving by his grace and that is a descent too low for many of us to want to actually go into. You see Christmas totally humbles us because it proclaims that nothing less than the death of the Son of God can rescue us. It also affirms us because he was actually willing to do that for us. the greatness of Jesus is seen in how far down he came to love us and to lift us up as we have already said in our service this morning in chapter two. Christmas turns all of our values on their head. God isn't attracted to us by impressive resumes and performances even religious performance.

[19:34] the only way to get God's approval is by acknowledging our brokenness our sinfulness our frailty our flaws our failures and our desperate desperate need for his mercy.

So thirdly if we accept it God's grace gives us an ultimate rest that we experience even now at Christmas time.

at the end of this list of names there's an obscure verse in verse 17. It says there were 14 generations in all from Abraham to David 14 from David to the exile in Babylon and 14 from the exile to the Messiah.

For many years I just skipped across that verse and went technical detail. And yet nothing's ever lost in the scriptures.

There's something very profound even though that does not mean a lot for us right here right now in terms of reading it but that was massive news what was just written there is news for the first recipients of Matthew's gospel.

[20:56] Let me explain it to you. In the Bible the number seven is very significant. Right at the beginning of the Bible it's the number for completeness it's the number for the goal of all things.

Right at the beginning of the Bible God did the work of creating the world in six days and it says on the seventh day he rested. God wasn't tired rest means the enjoyment of the created order in fact rest was the goal of creation that's why you don't have in the Bible and then it was Monday morning and God went back to work it was the seventh day that's the goal the enjoyment of all of creation everything at peace and harmony everything was perfect until sin entered the picture the first people decided to reject God's loving rule over their life and they chose for themselves how they think life should work and that state of perfection and harmony that state of rest was fractured destroyed there wasn't any harmony or peace anymore life was now characterized by hardships and pandemics and lockdowns and work was going to be done at the sweat of your brow raising children was going to be painful weeds and pests you'll never ever conquer those things for goodness sake never conquer them always growing in your lawn but

God still graciously provided for his people he instituted a seventh day of rest as part of their normal cycle in the week but he also instituted an ultimate day of rest an ultimate year of rest in fact it was called the year of jubilee and at the end of the last year of the seventh period of seven years that is the 49th year that was the year of jubilee it was the year of rest no work was to be done imagine that a year of rest no work at all no plough no fields were ploughed it was a year that began on the day of fresh beginnings when the whole nation just received forgiveness for their sin the jubilee year was characterized by freedom and return freedom from burdens labor and debt were to go hand in hand with restoring of broken family ties and repossession of lost property all debts were canceled on the year of jubilee everything restart after 49 years a year of rest and celebration the year of jubilee the year that the nation of

Israel looked forward to year after year after year just waiting for jubilee to come verse 17 in Matthew 1 tells us that there were three lots of 14 generations or there were six lots of seven generations with Jesus beginning the seventh seven verse 17 is saying that what the hope of the

jubilee year foreshadowed the reestablishment of ultimate rest comes right now in the person of Jesus Christ no more counting of generations actually continued after Jesus in him is where rest harmony peace hope security can be found if you grasp that Christmas is not upon a time story but that

Jesus really actually broke God himself broke into time and space and that he has accomplished our salvation so that the prostitute and the king are equaling him it's possible for you to have rest right now rest from all your striving all of your attempt to build your identity total enduring final rest is what every single human being needs the rest that Jesus secures for us is a rest that we get to get both now and forever with him Jesus gives us rest for our souls right now the inner core of our being that's always unrelenting always restless always pursuing the latest acquisition the latest affirmation and

[26 : 22] Jesus says in Matthew 11 verse 28 come to me all who are weary and burdened and I I will give you rest take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls many many philosophers today speak about the deep hunger that is in the human heart constantly restless people are hungry for love they are hungry for security they're hungry for significance and meaning and Jesus says I am the bread of life feed on me and you will never hunger again many today are walking in darkness and disillusionment and despair and Jesus says I am the light of the world if you follow me you will never walk in darkness instead you will have the light of life others in the last couple of years especially are just fearful of death fearful of death and Jesus says

I am the resurrection the life he who believes in me will live even though he dies and whoever lives and believes in me will never die you see Christmas declares that you can have rest right now rest in our souls right now if we come to Jesus the rest of an unspilled love between you and your created God what a gift what a gift Christmas is not a once upon a time story that shows us how we should live better lives and be generous to people and give them gifts and Christmas is news it's news and I love it you walk down into Westfield or Chatswood Chase and it's being blasted through the speakers news as people fill their lives with everything else news calls us to acknowledge it something has already happened and we need to respond to it the world has broken into time and space to save us this event is not so much a birth as it is a coming the coming of God into the world and so

Christmas is good news not good advice it turns all of our values on its head and it's the promise of ultimate rest he calls us to look to him to come to him to trust him to believe him to follow him and to find rest the rest that we so desperately long for even now this Christmas in him amen what to be to is to save