

The Fathers of Jesus

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[0 : 00] Good evening, everyone. It's great to be in church with you tonight. If I've never met you before, my name is Stephen, senior pastor here at St. Paul's. And it is always great to be at church with you, but particularly on, I think, Christmas time. I just love Christmas time. I've got three young girls at home right now. They've gone to bed. Hopefully they're asleep. And just excited. The reindeer food's been put out, attracting the possums and everything else. But they'll think it's the reindeers in the morning. Just an exciting time of year.

And with three young girls, I noticed the youngest is seven at the moment. But when they're sort of around four or five, the height of ambition for them at this time of year, because they're girls and because they're too old to play Jesus in the nativity, the best thing is to be merry.

They all kind of line up. They want to be merry. If they're going to have any sort of nativity play, every five-year-old girl wants to play merry. And each year, unfortunately, only one girl is ever picked. As it turns out, mine never been picked. I don't know how that worked out with the senior pastor thing. Because we don't play favourites around here. Each year, only one girl is ever picked. And they've reached the theatrical dizzying heights of being merry.

And from these two central roles, if you're not Jesus, you're not merry in the nativity play. It's descending order of importance from that moment on. There's the Magi, which is fantastic. There's always a bunch of angels. They don't have to say too much. There's the shepherds. There's the King Herod. He's the boo-his guy. There's the sheep, the donkeys.

Ironically, there was actually no donkeys actually in Bethlehem at the time. But for some reason, we've always got donkeys in the nativity scene. There's cows. And somewhere, there's some poor lad who gets the gig of Joseph. Doesn't say anything. Like most husbands at the birthday, their children. Just there. Because we're meant to be. And so some poor lad's got Joseph, and he really doesn't want to really say anything at all. And the scripts often forget that in actual fact, as we've just read, an angel also came to Joseph. He has a fairly key role in this whole nativity scene. In fact, there's at least one thing that the angel said to Joseph that he didn't tell anyone else. He didn't tell Mary, didn't tell the shepherds, said it just to Joseph. Angel tells Joseph in a dream that the baby that is to be born to his fiancée, Mary, is a fulfillment of a prophecy from hundreds of years earlier. And it's a prophecy that God would come and dwell amongst his people. And so in this interaction between Joseph and the angel, we have a very, very invaluable treasure. And so tonight, I just want to look at that passage from Matthew 1 really quick.

[3 : 32] Three main things to learn from the name Emmanuel. Only Joseph was told Emmanuel is his name. Three main things. Number one, Jesus is God. Number two, that he is human. And three, that he is with us.

So I know it's a bit after 11, but three simple things to remember. Number one, Jesus is God. There are several ways that Matthew drives home the core Christmas message that Jesus is not simply a great religious leader. He's not just simply a great teacher or even some angelic being, but in fact, the divine God himself. In verse 20 of what Nick just read out to us, the angel tells Joseph that the human life that is growing inside Mary has come not from any human being, but from his heavenly father, from God himself. And so Jesus, if you like, has two fathers and Joseph will be Jesus' father only in a secondary sense. Mary is told in the text, is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. God is the real father.

However, the most direct statement of Jesus' identity comes in verse 23. Matthew quotes from Isaiah chapter 7, several hundred years before, and he says, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Now, for centuries, Jewish religious leaders and scholars had known about that prophecy, but they had not thought that it should be taken quite literally. Matthew is saying that this promise is greater

than even all the scholars imagined. Jesus Christ is God with us because the human life growing in the womb of Mary was a miracle performed by God himself. This child, as we have just sung, is literally God. Now, Matthew was a Jew, which makes this statement really startling for him. You see, the Jewish had a distinctive view of God, which made them, the people on earth, at that time, least open to the idea that a human being could be God. At that time, Eastern religions believed God was an impersonal force permeating all things. And so it wasn't unusual for them to say that some human beings were, if you like, particularly great manifestations of the divine. Western religions at the time believed that gods would disguise themselves as human beings for their own purposes.

[6 : 50] So you see this in Greek and Roman mythology and in their concept of deity. Jews, however, believed in a God who was both personal and infinite.

God was not a being within the universe, but was instead the ground of its existence and infinitely transcendent above the universe. So everything in a Jewish worldview was against the idea that a human being could be God. Jews would not even pronounce the name of their God, Yahweh. They wouldn't even spell it. And yet Jesus Christ, a Jew, by his life, by his claims and by his resurrection, convinced his closest Jewish followers that he was not just a prophet telling them how to find God, but that he was God himself coming to humanity.

Now, Matthew is not the only biblical author to teach this. John, the apostle, Paul, another Jew, a Pharisee, the apostle Peter, another Jewish man, they all declared it.

Now, of course, the opinions of these authors would not mean much if Jesus himself hadn't clearly declared his divine identity.

[8 : 29] All through the Gospels, every book, history book about Jesus, you see Jesus constantly forgiving sin, which only God can do.

He also claims, I'm going to come back and I'm going to judge all of humanity across every culture and generation and only God can do that. And at many times, in many ways, Jesus Christ, a Jewish man says, I am God.

And thousands and thousands of people came to believe him and worship him. It's a claim that we've just sung.

Many in this world know the claim and give it lip service at Christmas without thinking about the implications of that claim and what we have just sung.

If Jesus really is God, what does it mean for us practically? Well, firstly, it's a intellectual watershed.

[9 : 37] It's a turning point for us. Some have argued that the supreme miracle of Christianity is not the resurrection of Christ from the dead, but the coming of God into the world as a human being.

Of all the things that Christianity proclaims, this one is the most staggering. A Canadian theologian, James Packer, puts it bluntly.

He says, God became man. The divine son became a Jew. The almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie, stare, wriggle, make noises, needing to be fed and changed and talked to like any other child.

The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is as fantastic as this.

The claim that Jesus is God is an intellectual turning point, but it also causes a personal crisis. A crisis is a fork in the road.

[10 : 58] And the assertion that Jesus Christ is God is exactly that. Whenever you see Jesus acting in the Gospels, you see him putting people in motion wherever he goes.

He's like this giant bowling ball. Wherever he goes, he breaks up old patterns and he sends people off into different directions. Jesus evokes extreme reactions from everyone.

Some are so furious with him that they try to run him off a cliff and kill him. Others are so terrified by him that they say, just depart from me, Jesus.

Get away from me. And others fall down before him and worship him. Why the extreme reactions? It's because of who he claims to be. If he is who he is, who he says he is, then you have no alternative but to center your life around him as we have just sung.

[12 : 07] He claims to be the God who created all things, the source of all life, the one who defines all reality. And so if he is not who he says he is, then he is someone to hate, he is someone to run away from because he would have to be the greatest fraud in history.

No other response makes sense. Either he is God or he isn't and so he's absolutely mad or he's infinitely wonderful.

He's one or the other. He's not just someone in the middle that you can just admire. So thirdly, the claim that Jesus is God also gives us the greatest possible hope.

You see, the one who defines all things, creates all things, determines, defines all reality, says that our world is not all that there is and there is life and there is love after death and that evil and suffering will one day end.

But this is not just hope for the world despite all its unending problems, but hope for you and me despite all of our unending failings.

[13:36] A God who was only holy would never have come down to us in Jesus Christ. He would have simply just said, you lot, pull yourselves together.

Pull your socks up. Live a little bit more morally. Make yourself holy enough to merit a relationship with me. A deity, on the other hand, that was an all-accepting God of love would never have needed to come to earth either.

This God of the modern imagination would have just overlooked sin and evil and just embraced us all like a big jelly baby.

And neither of these gods would have bothered with Christmas. The biblical God, however, is infinitely holy. So our sin cannot just be shrugged off and ignored.

It has to be dealt with. But he is also infinitely loving. And he knows that we could never, ever climb up to him.

[14:55] And so he had to come to us. God had to come himself and do what we could not do. Christmas means then that there is all the hope in this world, in him.

That's the first thing. Jesus is God. Secondly, Jesus is human. This interaction between Joseph and the angel reveals that he's God, but also that he's human, that he is God with us.

Christmas tells us that Jesus was truly and fully God and truly and fully human. But what, I mean, who gives a rip?

What difference does that make? That he is actually God who's become fully human. It means a life of sacrificial service, as Jake just read out to us from Philippians chapter 2.

That passage teaches us that when the Son of God became human, he did not lay aside his deity. He was still God, but he emptied himself of his glory.

[16:10] It's said there that it was something that he did not grasp, something he did not use for his own purposes, his own gain. He laid aside his divine rights.

He became vulnerable and ordinary in order to save us. I'll quote Packer again. He puts it like this, for the Son of God to empty himself and become poor meant a laying aside of glory, a voluntary restraint of power, an acceptance of hardship, of isolation, of ill treatment, of malice and misunderstanding, and finally a death that involved such agony, spiritual even more than physical, that his mind nearly broke under the prospect of it.

It meant love to the utmost for unloving humanity. And I love how Packer, what he does with that and what it means for us practically.

He says, the Christmas spirit does not shine out in the Christian snob. For the Christmas spirit is the spirit of those who, like their master, live their whole lives on the principle of making themselves poor, spending and being spent to enrich their fellow humanity, giving time, trouble, care and concern, to do good to others and not just their own friends in whatever way there seems need. It's a life of service. The fact that God became human and entered himself of his glory means that you should not want to hang out with the people just with power and glitz who are well networked who can open doors for you.

[18:04] You need to be willing to go to the people without power, without beauty, without the money. That is the Christmas spirit. It is so ironic that we spend billions on it at Christmas time and more often than not, not for the needy and for the poor.

God becoming one of us also means infinite comfort for the suffering. A little bit later in the New Testament in Hebrews 2, verse 17.

It says that Jesus was made just like us, fully human in every way. And the very next verse tells us what this means for us practically. It says, because he himself suffered when he was tried and tested, he is able to help those who are being tried and tested.

You see, when something bad happens to us and real suffering comes to us, the overwhelming feeling we have is loneliness. People around us, they express sympathy, but, you know, you know, in the midst of them expressing their sympathy, you know, there's something about it that doesn't

help.

Then you meet someone who knows, who's been through exactly what you've been through, or virtually exactly what you've been through. They know what it's like.

[19 : 42] And you pour your heart out to that person. They've got empathy for you. You listen to them and their opinions because they've been through the same thing.

And when they comfort you, you feel comforted by them. The coming of God into this world on the first Christmas ultimately means that God suffered and that Jesus triumphed through suffering. And Jesus now has infinite power to comfort. Christmas shows you a God unlike the God of any other faith.

Have you been betrayed? Have you been lonely? Have you been destitute? Have you had relationships fracture?

Have you felt abandoned? Have you faced death? So has he. And he's triumphed through it.

[20 : 47] Christianity says God has been all the places that you have been and are potentially in right now. He has been in the darkness that you are in now and even more.

You can trust him. You can rely on him. He knows suffering. He has the power to comfort, strengthen and bring you through it because point number three, Jesus is with us.

You see, it would have been astonishing enough if the Son of God had become human and simply lived temporarily amongst us and left us some really good teaching stuff to follow. Do this and life will go well for you.

His plans were just so infinitely greater than that. His plan was always to be with us. He, one of the first things he did when he went public with his ministries, chose 12 dudes and, to follow him and appointed them as his early apostles.

And he says, I want, you're going to be with me. What does it mean that they are with him? It means being in his presence, conversing with him, learning from him, having his comfort moment by moment in their day-by-day life.

[22 : 05] You see, the purpose of God coming into this world is that we would actually have a relationship with him, that we not just know information about him but have a relationship with him.

In Jesus, the unapproachable God becomes a human being who can be known and loved. And through faith, we can know this love.

And frankly, it doesn't stun us as much as it should. See, in the Old Testament, anytime anyone drew near to God, it was terrifying.

Totally terrifying. God appears to Abraham as a smoking furnace, to Israel as a pillar of fire, to Job as a hurricane and a tornado.

When Moses asked to see God face to face, he was told, yeah, but it'll kill you. So great and so high and so unapproachable is this God.

[23 : 10] And the message of Christmas means that through Jesus, you can meet this God and he won't kill you. You can know the unapproachable personally and without terror.

And when God showed up in Jesus, he was not a pillar of fire, he was not a tornado, he was a baby. Why would God come to, this time, why would he come as a baby rather than a firestorm or a whirlwind?

Because this time he came not to bring judgment but to bear it. to pay the penalty for our sin, to take away the barrier that existed, the wall of hostility between humanity and God so that we can be together.

Jesus is God with us. Every Christmas, tonight, millions of people around this world will join with us and sing Jesus, our Emmanuel.

But are you really with him? Do you know him or do you just know about him?

[24 : 31] Jesus literally moved heaven and earth to get near us. What should we be doing now to truly be with him? Well, there's one crucial trait, one crucial step that's necessary for having a personal relationship with Jesus and it's one that Christians, especially in Western society, we often overlook it.

An intimate relationship with Jesus always requires courage. I mean, it's often overlooked Joseph in this whole story, how much courage he must have had to wake up from a dream with an angel and in his society to be shamed, to be, for his fiancée to be pregnant was an act of shame for him or for her or for both of them and then to go home and tell his mates, well, actually, I'm not the father, God is.

That's plausible. It required an immense amount of courage for him to take Mary and for him to adopt Jesus and it requires courage of us.

We cannot know Jesus personally unless we have the courage to admit that we are sinners. Jesus' entire mission is summed up in verse 21 of the text that was read out to us from Matthew chapter 1. He will save his people from their sins. First and foremost, Jesus came to forgive us.

[26 : 21] Every other blessing that we have, the comfort, the hope, every other blessing flows from that. Are you willing to say, I'm a moral failure?

I don't love God with all of my heart, my soul, my strength, and my mind. I don't love my neighbour as myself. And therefore, I am guilty and I need forgiveness and pardon before I need anything else.

That takes enormous courage to admit because it means that you throw your old self-image that you've spent your lifetime building out, you throw it out and you get a new one through Jesus. And yet, this is the foundation of every other blessing that Jesus wants to bring into your life. All the comfort, all the hope, all the joyful humility and everything else.

So how do we get the strength to be courageous like that, to admit that we are moral failures and we need him? By looking at him.

[27 : 28] That's how we do it. Because if you think it takes courage to be with him, consider that it took infinitely more courage for him to be with us.

Only Christianity of every world religion and philosophies, only Christianity says that one of the attributes of the divine God is courage.

No other religion has a God who needed courage. God is to God is to save us only by facing an agonizing death that had him wrestling in sweat in a garden just before he was arrested.

He became mortal and vulnerable so that he could suffer and be betrayed and killed. He faced all these things for you and for me and he thought it was worth it.

Look at him. Face the darkness for you. Look at him doing that and that will enable you to face any darkness yourself.

[28 : 44] You've heard the phrase, hark the herald angels sing, mild he lays his glory by. What does it mean mild he lays his glory by?

He did it voluntarily, he did it willingly and he did it lovingly. No one forced him, it wasn't his duty, he faced unimaginable pain and death out of love for you.

Why did Jesus have the courage to do what he did for us? Love. No other explanation for it. And how do we get the courage to admit that we're sinners and need his forgiveness and a relationship with him exact same way?

See him doing all that he did for us. That will draw out of us love for him. And then we will have the courage to put him where he belongs as the God of the universe in the center of our lives.

And then he will be with us and you'll be with him. Emmanuel. Jesus is God. Jesus is human.

[29 : 55] And Jesus is with us. Merry Christmas.