

Baby born in a shed saves world!

First Sunday of Christmas

31st December 2017

Luke 2:21-35

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It has become a tradition these days for the nation's leaders to issue Christmas messages. On this occasion, Malcom Turnbull, the Prime Minister, called on everyone to "be there for each other". Meanwhile Bill Shorten, the Leader of the opposition, thanked Australia's defence force and emergency service workers.

Overseas, Christmas messages ranged from an appeal not to lose hope in Germany to the importance of home and community in the United Kingdom. In France Christmas was dominated by a decision in the courts to ban the display of nativity scenes in public places while allowing them in other locations as long as they were not proselytising.

In North Korea, Christmas was banned with an order to celebrate the birth of Kim Jong-un's grandmother instead. Kim Jong-suk, the wife of North Korea's first dictator, was born on 24th December 1919 to be known as the "Sacred Mother of the revolution".

What does Christmas mean to most people? Recent research in Australia indicates Christmas revolves around celebrations and holidays with family and friends. Moreover, Christmas is a time to share love and to help people, it's a time to show gratitude and to be kind to one another, it's that time of the year when we reflect on what's truly important in life.

Certainly this was the case in Pakistan where Christians, a distinct vulnerable minority, proceeded to celebrate the birth of Jesus in the wake of an attack by two suicide bombers on a crowded Methodist Church in the city of Quetta two weeks ago. Nine people died and at least fifty seven were injured.

How did you celebrate Christmas? And what did Christmas mean for you?

Perhaps this question seems a little "old hat" now as we are on the cusp of the New Year. Sydney is preparing for "the most spectacular fireworks show yet" while Brisbane, Gold Coast, Melbourne, Adelaide and many other places around the country are preparing to

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herald-in the New Year by lighting up the sky with blasts of fabulous colours and celebrating in style with a ton of good cheer.

But you see, Christmas is not a simply a one-off event that has certain significance on the day but then fades in the wake of new celebrations involving New Year, Australia Day, Anzac Day and so on.

Rather, Christmas is meant to go on every day with the acknowledgement that it is more than a time of goodwill and kindness to others. It is more than a celebration of family or an opportunity to holiday with friends. Rather, Christmas involves a profound change to way the world is and to way we are to both understand ourselves and live our lives!

Let me elaborate.

According to the customs of the day, Mary the mother of Jesus would have been considered impure for forty days after giving birth to her baby son. After that time Mary would have then brought an offering to the temple which the priest received effecting her purification. Moreover, every first-born male would be presented in the belief that the first-born are to be specifically dedicated to serving God.

Luke's Gospel tells this story and it is done with the ancient narrative of Samuel in mind. Here Samuel's mother, Hannah, presents her-first born to God "for all the days of his life" (Samuel 1:11). Samuel rose to become the last of the Hebrew Judges and first of the major prophets. His leadership was legendary as he anointed the first two kings, Saul and then David.

Friends, something quite important is going on here. For you see, the purification of Mary and the presentation of the child, Jesus, in the temple is no ordinary event. It's an event, it's an occasion loaded with significance and meaning. And that significance and that meaning says Jesus is being set aside for a specific task. Moreover, Jesus is being identified as a special, quite unique person.

There is a vital declaration going on here that reinforces what Luke already says earlier on in the Gospel when the angel, Gabriel speaks to Mary saying her baby will be "holy" and will be called the "Son of God" (Luke 1:32). There is a critical announcement coming forth here that underpins what Luke recorded on the night Jesus is born as the angel on high proclaims "Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:11).

Friends, today we see and today we acknowledge that Jesus is no ordinary child. Christmas is much more than the birth of little baby. Christmas is much more than a rustic nativity scene or a group of amiable shepherds gathered around a manger. For in all of this, the baby, this child Jesus, is being presented, is being declared and is being proclaimed as the Saviour of the world!

Now that's an incredible, most important claim. But there is more.

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Luke introduces two characters, Simeon and Anna. They were devout, faithful people, probably not of great social standing or extensive significance within the temple precinct. However, they were people with real vision and enormous wisdom. And upon seeing Jesus, they identify who he is.

Simeon and Anna acknowledge that here, among them, is the one who is the Son of God, here among them is the one upon whom the world's future depends, the one who will bring light within the darkness and hope to a world shattered by fear and violence. In short, Simeon and Anna identify this child, Jesus, as the Saviour of the world.

And Simeon declares this with such profundity in the words:

'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

This is a remarkable declaration because not only does Simeon make a statement concerning who Jesus is, Simeon also makes a statement about himself. For here, Simeon speaks about his death.

Now this may seem a bit odd in the light of our Christmas celebrations. Why bring death into such a joyous occasion?

But, you see, what is going on here is this. The old man Simeon, who has waited so long and who has been so patient for this special day, can now face death with courage and with conviction.

Simeon can do this as he picks up the child Jesus, touches him, feels him and embraces him. Simeon can accept his own vulnerability and his imminent mortality because here in front of him is God's promise of salvation.

Simeon can pronounce these words because, in the child, Jesus, there is a promise that says death will no longer be the final, destructive force it once was. Here within the embrace of this old man we receive God's gift of unconditional love, an unconditional love that will wipe out our fears, forgive our sins, cancel our debts and offer each and every one of us a relationship with God that cannot be taken away from us – ever!



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Now, I find all this quiet incredible. Today we are challenged to grow beyond all the good cheer, the nice feelings, the family festivities, the holidays on the beach, the Boxing Day Cricket Test and all the controversy surrounding who took line honours in the Sydney to Hobart Yacht race - to embrace what Christmas really means.

Today we to look at the devoutness and faithfulness of Simeon. Today we are to consider the vision and the wisdom of Anna as these seniors both recognise and declare who Jesus is.

For this tiny baby, the little child who is presented in the temple is none other than the one who comes to save us. This infant, the babe who is sighted by Simeon and Anna, is the one who is so graciously given to show us the way, to lift the darkness, take on our fears and to offer each and everyone of us life in all its fulness.

Archbishop Glenn Davies, here in Sydney, tried something different this year in his Christmas message with the use of twitter. And in his message Glenn Davies "twitters" eight simple yet profound words: **"baby born in a shed saves the world"**

This message carries the hash tag *"#canyoubelieveit"*. **"baby born in a shed saves the world"** – this, my friends, is the ongoing message of Christmas, a message that Simeon and Anna bore witness to so long ago. This is the ongoing message of Christmas that we bear witness to today.

May this declaration be our greatest priority, not only in what we believe, but in in how we live our lives. May this proclamation shape us into who we are as the church today. Indeed, may this truth nurture, inspire and encourage each one of us as the New Year, 2018, harkens!

For that baby born in a shed is, indeed, the Saviour of the world!

Amen.

