

YOUR GOD REIGNS

**Christmas Day 2018
West Epping Uniting Church**

Isaiah 52:7-9 and John 1:1-5;14

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Could you imagine Christmas without the bright star, the shepherds or the wise men? Could you picture Christmas without the manger scene with Mary and Joseph gathered around the new born babe? Could you envisage Christmas without any reference to that little town of Bethlehem or to the angels from the realms of glory?

Every year we tell the story of Christmas, often in much detail, as Mary and Joseph journey to Bethlehem, as there is no room in the inn for them to stay, as shepherds watching their fields by night are overawed an angelic host and come to worship the new born babe, and as wise men from the east arrive, guided by a star, bearing gifts for the child.

And we do so because this is a marvellous story. It's a somewhat compelling narrative as it contains elements of mystery, hope and joy. It touches the heart and stirs the emotions. It lifts the soul and it offers a gentle, tender perspective on what is, in reality, a harsh, competitive world.

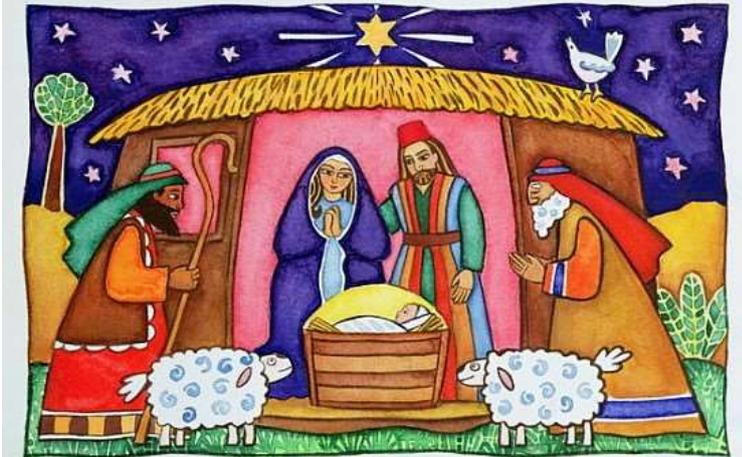
But if it wasn't for Mathew and Luke's Gospels we would not have a Christmas story. Even in Matthew and Luke the story of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem barely rates a chapter apiece.

Yet, out of these two brief accounts, we have weaved a plethora of pageants, plays, tableaus and yarns that draw the attention of millions around the world every year.

Now, I am not suggesting this is a bad thing. It's actually quite wonderful as the story of the nativity infuses us all with a real sense of peace and a joyous touch of hope in a world where things often seem to be just getting out of hand.

However, in becoming immersed in the sheer details of the Christmas story – the bright star, the little town of Bethlehem, the shepherds, the wise men and the manger scene, we may risk, as the old idiom says – not seeing the wood for the trees. In other words, the delight, the tenderness and even the sentimentality of the Christmas story may actually cloud us from seeing or understanding what it all really means.

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The other two Gospels in the New Testament don't even mention Christmas. Mark's Gospel, which was the first to be written, simply starts off with words: *"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"*. And then we meet Jesus, a full-grown adult about to be baptised in the river Jordan.

John's Gospel is a little more complicated. While Mark seems to be an ordinary sort of bloke writing to a common group of people, John is more philosophical. John infuses his work with Greek ideas and Greek concepts to commence this Gospel with the words:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John then goes on to say: *"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son full of grace and truth."*

John states that Jesus, again, first appears a full-grown adult presenting himself for baptism in the river Jordan.

What is really going on here in Mark's and John's Gospels is that the evangelists are more interested in talking about who Jesus is rather than in how and when Jesus was born.

In Mark's case, Jesus is presented to us as "Son of God". This was a mighty big claim because it says Jesus is the one to be honoured above everything else. According to Mark's witness, Jesus is the one who demonstrates to us the best way to live. Jesus is the one who offers us a glimpse of who God is. Jesus is the one through whom we can know God and live in communion with God.

Now this was, in effect, a controversial, even subversive claim. For you see, in Jesus' day the imperial cult of Rome declared the emperor has divine status. In this case, the previous emperor, Julius, had been declared a "god" while his son, Augustus, the emperor of the day, was known as a "son of god".

This meant that, in declaring Jesus "Son of God", Mark makes a claim that rivals Rome's authority. Mark effectively contests Rome's claim over his life as a subject person. It means the highest authority in one's life was to nobody but Jesus.

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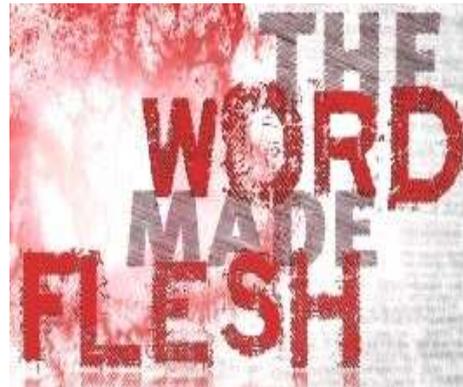
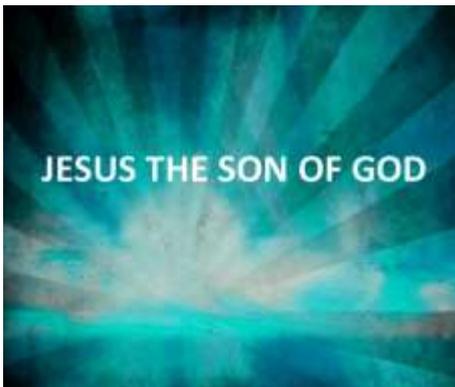
John's Gospel gets a little more complicated. But what John is saying is this. As the "Word" or in the language of John's day – the "Logos", Jesus is the one who most fully discloses who God is and what God calls us to be. In the person of Jesus, we see that God is active in the world around us. In the person of Jesus, we hear God's word, we encounter God, we get to know God!

So, you see, Christmas is really about God making God-self known to us in Christ. Christmas is really about God disclosing God-self to us in the life of Jesus. Christmas is really about God saying to us that, in the person of his Son, we get to see who God is. We get to understand what God calls us to be. We get to see what life is really all about.

And friends, this is Good News. It's really Good News!

The words of the ancient prophet Isaiah sums this up quite nicely when he says: "*Your God reigns*". What Isaiah says to us is this – we live in God's world. We are God's people. Life is all about encountering God, knowing God and following God. And the best way to do this is to look to Jesus.

Jesus "Son of God", "Word made flesh" and God's subsequent rule is what Christmas is really about.



And as I move on in ministry towards the end of my placement here in West Epping and as I reflect on a varied ministry that has taken me all over the world to engage with people in so many places, the thing that stands out for me is this - encountering God in Jesus "Son of God", experiencing God as "Word made flesh" and living under God's rule is not about worldly power or prestige.

It's not about wealth or prosperity. It's not about being successful or being insulated from sadness, suffering or tragedy. It's not about coercion or getting one's way. It's not about being certain, of dotting all the "I's", crossing all the "T's" and getting all the doctrine right. It's not even about knowing where I am going. It's simply about encountering God in Jesus Christ and experiencing that God who loves us unconditionally.

Friends, Jesus "Son of God", Jesus "Word made flesh" and the subsequent "reign of God" points to a way of life that cannot be comprehended or, indeed, summed up in terms of this world's values and priorities.

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It cannot be defined, boxed-in or nailed down according to one's own particular preconceptions, aspirations or needs. It cannot be lassoed or seized upon or according to one's own will. It's all much bigger than that!

The "reign of God" revealed to us in Jesus - "Son of God", "Word made flesh", is a mysterious yet life-affirming event. It's a confounding yet life-sustaining reality. It can even be a disturbing yet life-changing experience.

As we gather around the manger this morning, as we ponder that scene in the little town of Bethlehem and as we celebrate with shepherds, wise men and choirs of angels, remember, that in the messiness and uncertainty of your lives, Jesus "Son of God", Jesus "Word made flesh" is born for you.

Jesus is born to give you life – life in all its fullness. Jesus is born to rule over that life. And this is done through an unmerited, unconditional love that God offers to you - as pure gift.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, today, enjoy all the fine, beautiful, glorious details of Christmas. But don't get hung up on all the trimmings. Don't get waylaid by the adorable, endearing nature of the scene. Rather, listen to Mark's declaration. Take in what John is saying.

The coming of Jesus heralds the incoming reign of God, the birth of Jesus offers a new way of life, it brings about a new way of being.

For, in all of this, God rules in our hearts. God rules in our lives. God claims this world as God's own. And today we declare that God's way of doing things is all that matters.

Today we declare that God rules. God rules with love, justice, mercy and peace. Let us, therefore, rejoice and be glad!

Amen.

