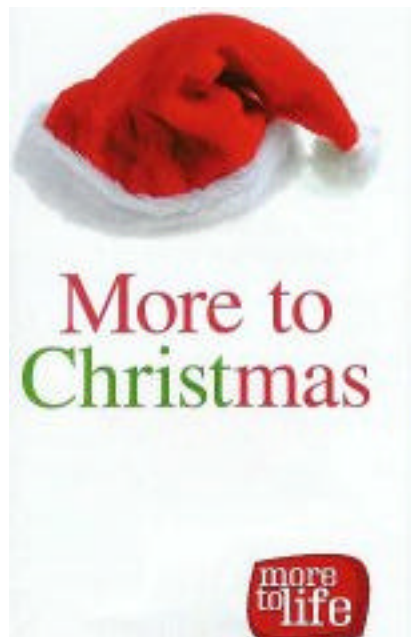


“More to **Christmas**...More to Life”

Sermon Series Summary Booklet

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Missing the Main Event - Mark 11:1-11

You know by now how much I like films. As this is the first Sunday in Advent I think a Christmas film will be just the thing for us. One of my favourite Christmas films is Miracle on 34th Street. It is a 1947 film which got a make over and update in the 1990's. The film centres on a little girl and her single mother. The mother is a career woman and heads up the advertising and promotions side of a large children's department store in town – a big toy store – the Hamley's of America.

At Christmas her main job is to arrange a large and extravagant Christmas parade through the city streets. This in turn draws people into the store to see Santa Claus and to buy lots of toys and gifts. Her Santa is a disaster this year and a passer by who looks very Santa like takes over and goes down a treat. Anyway not to spoil the film for you too much I'll cut to the chase. This woman is so caught up in her work, in the planning for the parade, in the Santa problems in the store and the nasty measures her store rivals will go to in order to win the Christmas custom, she ends up missing the main event.

The main event for her is her daughter rediscovering the magic of Christmas and the possibility of a new romance in her life – meeting Mr Right. Thankfully in the end all is well.

But as I think on that film I come to realise that just like that woman there are many in our world today who miss the main event. People are so caught up in having the best attractions in the garden, getting the best presents for their kids – even when they cannot afford them, arranging the best Christmas dinner ever, getting everything ready just on time – that they forget what Christmas is all about. They forget the real reason for the season.

This year I want to remind us that there is more to Christmas and more to life, and hopefully that will encourage us but also challenge us to share with family and friends the real reason behind Christmas.

This morning we begin with missing the main event. Now as we read our reading this morning you will have been thinking 'the pastor's gone loopy and he's got it all wrong again! It's not Easter but Christmas!'

And right you are. It is Advent and not Palm Sunday. But there are some key points in this passage which speak to us about missing the main event – and this year the main event is the celebration of God's greatest gift to the world – the gift of His Own Son. Let us see what lessons we can learn about missing the main event in order that we do not miss it this Christmas.

Jesus has been ministering around the countryside for almost three years now. He has been healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, making the lame to walk and

the deaf to hear. Indeed on the way towards Jerusalem Jesus and his disciples have come through Jericho where they met Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46ff). Jesus asked him what he wanted and Bartimaeus responded 'Rabbi I want to see.' Jesus healed him and he immediately could see and he followed Jesus.

Jesus had not been healing the sick and working miracles in their lives but he had preaching good news – telling people of their sin and pointing them back towards God. Some responded well others chose to ignore him and make him out to be a fool. As we reach this passage in Mark 11 Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem knowing himself that this is it. The days that lie in front of him are the culmination of his life's work. The events that will follow in the coming week will see God's plan worked out on earth for all people. His disciples are blissfully unaware as are his followers.

But here in Mark 11 Jesus approaches Jerusalem. He sends two disciples on ahead into the village they are approaching and gives them specific instructions. They will find a colt (a donkey) that has never been ridden. They are to untie it and bring it back to Jesus. This they do. Why a donkey? Was it because Mary rode on the back of a donkey all the way into Bethlehem that first Christmas as she prepared to give birth to the Saviour of the World? I'm afraid not. He chose a donkey so as to get the attention of the people as he rode in. He used a symbolic animal for his entrance to the city. The donkey was seen as an honourable animal. Kings rode on donkeys in peace and on horses in war. The symbolism here then is that of the Prince of Peace. He wanted to be enthroned in people's hearts as King.

Joining the Crowd but Not Recognising the Main Attraction

As Jesus went to get on the donkey his followers placed their cloaks on it so he had something to sit on other than the bare back of the donkey. As they journeyed along we read that many people spread their cloaks on the road. Here we see people joining the crowd but not recognising the main attraction. They see something unusual happening and want to join in. They are excited by what they see and want to be part of it.

Have you ever seen a bride leave her house and get into her big posh car to be driven to her wedding? As soon as you see that people want to run and see. They run to collect the coins that are traditionally thrown out of the window and not to see the bride. They miss the main the attraction for they are too busy worrying about collecting as much money as they can. This changes a little as people see wedding guests arriving at the church and hear the bagpipes playing and they gather to watch for the bride. They want to catch a glimpse of her dress to comment on how nice she looks. They see her dress but still the miss the main attraction – the uniting of two people in marriage.

Here in Mark 11 we see people joining the crowd but missing the main attraction. As Jesus and his followers journey into Jerusalem people see this entourage approaching and wonder what is going on. They see Jesus sitting on a donkey with some cloaks covering its back. They see others begin to lay their cloaks down on the ground for Jesus and the donkey to go over. Others still have grabbed branches which they have been cutting down and begin to spread them on the road in front of Jesus. People were joining in the procession without probably knowing what was going on.

How can we be sure of this? Well people were taking off their cloaks which they had and were laying them down. They weren't getting the spare clothes or old clothes they had. They weren't getting nice white linen clothes to lay down. They laid down what they had.

Others were in the fields working – well some were probably working anyway – and cutting down branches. They brought those branches out of the field and began to lay them down in front of Jesus and the donkey as well. Others may well have simply gone into the field and cut down a branch in order that they could join in with the crowd. Either way people were joining the crowd here and I'm not sure they actually knew who the crowd were following and cheering for. They did not recognise the main attraction in their desire to join a crowd and be part of what is going on.

The people had some idea what they were doing and who they were following – well at least they thought they knew who it was. Only kings rode into the main cities on the back of donkeys. They came to announce peace to the inhabitants. In this time when the Romans were in town and taking over the country the people were still looking for one who would come and bring them peace. They were looking for one who would overthrow the ruling authorities and bring the country back under its own rule. The crowd that day thought this was the man in front of them on the donkey. They saw someone riding into the city on a donkey and presumed he would bring peace. They joined the crowd but did not recognise the main attraction.

Do many not do exactly the same at Christmas time? We see the crowds gathering in the Thistle Centre and think there must be something special on offer so we join the crowd but in the hustle and bustle of Christmas shopping we miss the main attraction. We see the crowds running around our supermarkets fighting over the last turkey and join to ensure we get the food we want for the Christmas table and we run the risk of missing the main attraction. We see the crowds queuing up with their kids to see Santa Claus and we join in scared we won't get in to see him and the kids will be disappointed and yet we miss the main attraction.

Jesus was more than a babe born in a manger. He was more than a king on the back of a donkey offering peace. He is the Saviour of the World and God's greatest gift to

humanity. Don't get caught up joining the crowd this Christmas and not be recognising the main attraction.

Seeing the Show but Missing the Message

As we continue looking at the events of this Palm Sunday account we come to notice that people are seeing the show but missing the message. People are being dazzled by the laying down of cloaks and branches and they want to join in. They are caught up in the atmosphere of what is going on before their very eyes. They are mesmerised. They want to join in and be part of it. They want to behold the spectacle in front of them.

Some people when they go to the circus never get past the side shows. They get so caught up in the peripheral attractions that they never see what is on in the centre ring. It happens everywhere. I remember being at a football game in Perth with my brother when we lived in Crieff. It was St Johnstone against Hibs. My brother is ten years younger than me so he was probably ten or eleven at the time and although he liked football it didn't hold his attention for the full ninety minutes of a game. After 35 minutes he claimed to be hungry and wanted his halftime pie and juice. I tried to get him to wait those final ten minutes but he was getting impatient. We got up and went inside the stadium to get the pies. As we were inside we heard this great shout go up from the crowd - Hibs had scored and we had missed it. My brother was so caught up in the peripheral things - his pie - that we missed the main show and the main message - Hibs scored and it turned out to be the only goal of the game!

These people joining the crowd on the way into Jerusalem saw the show. They saw people welcoming a king into the city. They saw people laying down cloaks and branches. They saw the show and were excited by it. But they missed the message. Jesus was not coming into the city that day to free them from Roman rule. He was not going to overthrow the authorities. He was not going to bring peace - certainly not the kind of peace they were looking for.

Jesus was entering Jerusalem for the last time that day. He was heading for the cross of Calvary. He was going to be crucified and die. He was going to give his life as a ransom for many. He was dying in my place bearing the punishment for my sin on his back - and for you and your punishment too. Jesus was about to become the Saviour of the World.

The main message was that our sin had driven us so far away from God that we could not get back on right terms with him on our own. Jesus had to die to save us and to help restore that relationship with God. Jesus died that we might live. The main message was that a king was coming into the city riding on the back of a donkey. He was coming to bring peace - peace between man and God. But people were so caught up seeing the show that they missed the message.

What do we want in life? We want to be entertained, dazzled, thrilled, excited, and satisfied. But Jesus did not enter Jerusalem to dazzle us; he entered Jerusalem to die!

How many this Christmas will see the show but miss the message of Christmas? Food, presents, decorations, parties – these are all peripheral attractions that can certainly be enjoyed, but we must take care not to miss the message of Chris's birth.

Making Jesus King for a Day and Not Lord for Life

Not only did these people miss the main attraction and the main message but they were only making Jesus king for a day and not Lord for life. Everyone who gathered around Jesus that day both going on ahead of him and laying down their cloaks and branches, and those following behind were shouting and screaming. They were excited. They were caught up in the show. They proclaimed 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!'

They were looking for a Messiah. They were looking for one who would free them from the Romans. They were longing for God's chosen one. They even used words from the Psalmist as they cried out. And notice the word Hosanna actually means save. They were looking to be saved from the lives they had. And they thought this was the one who would achieve this for them.

By the way they treated Jesus that day, laying down their cloaks and branches, welcoming him into the city as king, shouting out these words of praise and adulation, they were making Jesus King – but only king for a day!

Why do I say that? Well notice what happened in verse 11. 'Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything but since it was already late he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.' No-one was in the temple. The crowd that followed him, shouting and screaming in their excitement, had or were disappearing. Only Jesus and the Twelve – his loyal band of followers, his disciples – went out to Bethany. They had made him king for the day but when night came they wandered away.

Even the next day as Jesus arose from his sleep in Bethany and headed back into Jerusalem there was nor crowd around him. Oh he managed to draw a crowd when he was in the temple turning the tables and teaching the people. And these people were even amazed we learn in verse 18 by his teaching. But they did not proclaim him as king a second day.

And even worse, by the time the week was out they had changed from crying out 'Hosanna' to demanding 'Crucify Him! Crucify Him!' The crowd had made Jesus king on Palm Sunday but by Good Friday he was been nailed to a cross. The crowd had

changed their opinion. Not that it mattered for his death on the cross was already planned and prepared for by God Almighty. This was the consummation of Jesus' life on earth. He had to die that our sins could be forgiven.

These people were quick to make Jesus king for a day but they could not go further and make him Lord for life. Romans 10:9 reminds us 'That if you confess with your mouth "Jesus is Lord" and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved.' These people saw an attraction, they saw a show and they thought they had someone to bring them peace from the Romans but having been caught up with the crowd they missed the main attraction and the main message and they missed being saved for all eternity. They missed the opportunity to make Jesus Lord of their life.

And Jesus is Lord. There is no denying that. To use a more Christmas time text turn to John 1. Verse 1 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' Jesus is Lord because he is God. He and the Father are one. Jesus is Lord because he is the creator of the world.

John 1:2 'He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without nothing was made that has been made.' Jesus was with God in the beginning as the world was created and made. He is Lord because he is God and he is creator.

He is also Lord because he is our redeemer. John 1:12 'Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in His name, he gave the right to become children of God.' Verse 16 'From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.' And a further word from Colossians 1:19 'For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.' Jesus died on the cross of Calvary to save us from our sin. He died to be our Redeemer. He is the one who paid the price for our forgiveness.

To make Jesus Lord for life you simply have to come to him. Confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. Repent and turn your life around. And Jesus will be Lord for life for you.

Conclusion

This Christmas the question is 'are you missing the main event?' On a Sunday over 2,000 years ago Jesus entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and people missed that main event. They didn't understand what was going on. They joined the crowd but did not recognise the main attraction. They saw the show but missed the main message. And they made Jesus king for a day but not Lord for life.

We are in danger of missing the main event this Christmas. We are in danger of joining the crowd in getting everything ready for the celebrations – the food, the presents, the parties and the cards – but not recognising the main attraction – the one without whom we wouldn't have Christmas in the first place. We are in danger of seeing the show – getting caught up in the fun and excitement – whilst missing the main message – Jesus Christ, God's own Son, born to a virgin called Mary in dirty stable because there was no room for her in the inn, who grew up to die on a cross to save the world from their sin. We are in danger of making Jesus king for a day – celebrating his birthday whilst we party away – but not Lord for life.

I hope you do not miss the main event this Christmas. And I hope you can encourage others not to miss it either.

Missing the Main Message – John 1:1-5

Shah Abbas was a Persian monarch who loved his people very much. To know and understand them better, he would mingle with his subjects in various disguises.

One day he went as a poor man to the public baths, and in a tiny cellar sat beside the fireman who tended the furnace. When it was meal-time the monarch shared his coarse food and talked to his lonely subject as a friend. Again and again he visited and the man grew to love him.

One day the Shah told him he was the monarch, expecting the man to ask for some gift from him. But the fireman sat gazing at his ruler with love and wonder and at last spoke: 'You left your palace and your glory to sit with me in this dark place, to eat of my coarse food, to care whether my heart is glad or sorry. On others you may bestow rich presents, but to me you have given yourself, and it only remains for me to pray that you never withdraw the gift of your friendship.'

The main message was remembered by this poor fireman – his ruler came to sit with him and offer him friendship. He wanted nothing else. God left the glories of his palace to come to earth to be with us. He came to sit in our dark world and to bring light to it. That is what we remember at Christmas. Unfortunately so many in our world are missing the main message for they are caught up in so many other things. Christmas is filled with many distractions. Between the personalities, the presents and the practices, it is easy to forget the real reason for this day.

John in his gospel did not clutter it with details of Mary and Joseph, of a dirty stable for there was no room in the inn, with shepherds called down from the hillside or even with wise men from the East. These were and are all important in the Christmas story, but John wanted to strip it back to record the moment when God left the glories of heaven to live on this earth with us. And we don't want to be missing the

main message this year – we want to get close to the action and remember the love of God that caused him to come and sit with us.

The Person

We begin by considering the person. We begin by remembering the baby Jesus and yet John does not describe him in such terms. John wants to get right to the root of what happened. He wants to take us to the real essence of Christmas. Forget the decorations and the trees, forget the turkey and the presents – and by the way in fact, many of the things we do and love so much are nothing more than ancient pagan rituals and symbols hijacked by the Christian church. John wants to take us to the person of Christmas. He longs to point us to the person of Jesus and tells us all about him.

Eternally God

John 1:1 'In the beginning was the Word.' Who is the word? What is the word? Jump to verse 14 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father full of grace and truth.' Jesus is the Word. He is the word of life to us. He is the alpha and the omega says John later in revelation, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. So we are in no doubt that this is Jesus we are talking about – the babe born in the manger.

John is talking of the incarnation – of God becoming man, of the Godhead taking on flesh, on God living among us. And in the middle of contemplating the Christmas scene we remember that as God took his place on earth in the form of Jesus Christ in human form, he was not born in some great palace, but he was born in a dirty smelly stable with manure on the ground no doubt. God broke into our darkness with his light and sat with us there.

As we think of the person we realise he is eternally God. 'In the beginning was the Word.' He was with God in the beginning. He was with God as the world was created and made.

But note this phrase in verse 1 'In the beginning was the Word' does not imply that the Word had a beginning. It is not saying that Jesus was created in the beginning. Because Jesus is God he has always been. The word "was" is in the "imperfect tense" it signifies "an action of the past that continues into the present." It could be read this way, "In the beginning was the word, is the Word and always will be the Word." The Word is eternal. He always has been and He always will be. Before there was anything else, there was the Word. Jesus had His birth in Bethlehem, but not His beginning. He has always been.

III. A couple of months before Christmas, the wife of a postman was killed in a car accident. The husband was overcome with grief and was trying to work through his

sorrow, and he had stayed late at his post office sorting through the mountain of mail that always comes through at Christmastime. His job that day was to go through the mail that had been lost and to find out where it should be re-directed.

He came across a letter that was addressed to "Santa Claus" and he noticed that the address at the top of the letter was his own address. So, he opened the letter. Looking down at the bottom of the page he saw that it was his only daughter's signature, and he read:

Dear Santa:

My Mommy died two months ago and since then my Daddy has been crying himself to sleep every night. He says only eternity will heal him. Would you please send a little bit of eternity to my Dad this Christmas?

Well God not only sent us a little bit of eternity, He sent us the very heart of heaven. As John put it later in his epistle, "And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world," 1 John 4:14.

The Word, Jesus, is eternally God. He has always been, is now and always will be God.

Equally God

Yet not only is he eternally God, but he is equally God. This person who is the main message has always been God. He is equally God. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.'

The word translated "word" in this verse is the Greek word "logos". It refers to "speech, reasoning, explanation, a word about something." That is who Jesus is! He is called the Word because a word is a visible expression of an invisible thought. Jesus is the perfect expression of who God is! Jesus is everything God has ever said or will say. He is everything God is about in human form.

The word "with" means "face to face, or toward". This tells us that Jesus was "face to face" with God. In other words, that He is God's equal. This reminds us that the God we serve is a triune God. There is one God Who manifests Himself in three Persons. The Word, Jesus, is one of those manifestations.

He is in fact so equal with God he was with God in the beginning and made the world with God. Verse 3 'Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.' So when God said in Genesis 1 'Let us make man in our image' he was referring to the trinity. Jesus was there at the start of time and being equal with God he made the world with God.

In Philippians 2 Paul writes that although Jesus was equal with God he gave up his divinity for a time to come to earth and live in the person of Jesus on earth. The Word is eternally God and equally God.

Don't miss the main message of Christmas – it is about a person John reminds us. And that person is eternally God and equally God. That person is Jesus: the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

The Present

The main message of Christmas is a person but he is also a present to the world. We will give and receive many presents this Christmas. Some we will like, others we won't. Some will be useful, others will be useless! The present from God to the world is the person Jesus. He is the babe born in the manger. He is the Son of God come to take on human flesh and live amongst us. He is one who sits beside us in our dark corners and befriends us. He is a gift to the world.

And it is that gift that Luke speaks of in his gospel as the angels came to the shepherds 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger.' The present wrapped up not in paper like most of our gifts this year, but a present wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger for there was no room or bed in the inn.

Maker of Creation

This present though says John is the maker of creation. Verse 3 'Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.' Think on this for a moment. The present we are talking of, the babe born in a manger in human frailty and weakness was the creator of the world. John reminds us that Jesus was with God in the beginning and was the maker of creation. He made the world with God. Everything that was made: the land and the sky, the sun and the moon, the mountains and the valleys, the trees and the plants, the birds and the fish and the animals of the land, and human beings – he made them all.

How amazing then that the one who made us so intricately – and think of how intricately – take the blood vessels in our bodies - laid end to end, the blood vessels in an average human body will stretch approximately 62,000 miles - 2.5 times around the earth! How amazing then that the one who made us was born as a babe in a dirty smelly stable in Bethlehem. The maker of creation humbled Himself and became a creature in creation! God became dependent upon a human mother. He needed fed and watered. He required to be cleaned up and to be changed. He needed to be watched over and cared for as he grew up. Jesus, who was the maker of Creation,

stepped out of eternity, laid aside His glory and entered this world as a human baby! That is the amazing fact of Christmas. That is the present of Christmas to us.

That is why this season is not about trees and tinsel; packages and parties; bows and boxes, or meals and mistletoe. This season is about Him! He is the Maker of creation!

Sustainer of Creation

This present given so freely at Christmas is not only the maker of creation but he is also the sustainer of creation. Verse 4 'In him was life and that life was the light of men.' Life. Vitality. Breath. Sustaining. Jesus, God's present to the world, is the sustainer of creation. He makes everything keep going. He keeps the world in working order.

III. Think of it this way, man can't really make anything that runs as it should. How often does your car break down? Or the washing machine? Or the computer? How many times do you shout at the computer screen because it has frozen or done something you did not want it to do?

But, take a look at our great planet and realize that it does not travel in a true circle; it travels in three directions at the same time. It revolves on its axis; it travels around the sun; and its path is deflected by other planets. Still it does not lose more than one one hundredth of a second every one hundred years. We can only say that Jesus is in control.

Then we look at the building block of this universe which is an atom, an entity so small that each atom is less than one hundred fifty millionth of an inch in diameter. If you could take the molecules of a single drop of water, convert them into grains of sand, there would be enough sand to build a concrete highway half a mile wide and one foot thick all the way from New York to San Francisco. And, there are 120 drops of water in a single teaspoon!

Combine that with the fact that one cell from your body contains 200 billion molecules of atoms. Whether you look at the universe with a telescope and see how big it is, or you look at this universe with a microscope and see how small it is. When you see the order, the symmetry, the harmony, the beauty of all that is, only a fool would fail to conclude God did it, and that God is in control. Jesus is the sustainer of creation.

This Christmas don't worry that the world seems out of control - Jesus is sustaining the world. And he is working out God's plans and purposes on earth that will ultimately one day lead to us going to heaven to be with him forever and ever. Jesus, God's present to the world, was born as a babe in the manger. He took on frail human flesh

and lived amongst us. He lived in the poverty we sometimes live in. He grew up and humbled himself and died on the cross – he was rejected by men and died that horrific death. And he did all because he loves us. The main message this Christmas is the person of Jesus, God's present to the world.

The Purpose

Bearing in mind the main message is a person and that person is a present to the world, what then is the purpose of that person and present. Why did God send his own son into the world? Why did the one who is eternally God and equally God give up the glories of heaven to come and live in human weakness and poverty? Why did the one who made the world and sustains the world allow himself to die on the cross of Calvary?

Light into Darkness

He did it for a purpose and for a reason. He did it to bring light into darkness. John 1:4 'In him was life and that life was the light of men. The light shines into the darkness but the darkness has not understood it.' This world was a dark place – by jings it is still a dark place. People had stopped following and worshipping God. They had forgotten all about him. They had turned to their own ways and tried to find their own happiness and satisfaction. When people sin, and that is what it is called when we walk our own way and not recognise God in our lives, they end up walking in darkness. It is a spiritual darkness. People try to find a way out and but they simply cannot. And so in the end God realised this and sent his own son into the world. Jesus came to shine light into our darkness.

The young Robert Louis Stevenson was looking out of the window one evening at the Edinburgh street in which he lived, when the old-fashioned lamplighter came past on his rounds. The boy's nurse called him to come and have his supper, but he couldn't bear to tear himself away from this remarkable sight. 'Look, look!' he cried, his face pressed against the glass, 'there's a man out there punching holes in the darkness.' That is what Jesus came to do. He came to punch holes in the darkness and shine his light of love. To those who recognise the light and the giver of the light there is the opportunity of forgiveness from sin and eternal life with God in heaven.

Life into Deadness

Not only was the purpose to bring light into darkness but it was also to bring life into deadness. For you see when someone is lost in the spiritual darkness, in that place where they can no longer see anything good, they are not only blind but also dead – spiritually dead. When we are lost in sin we are dead in that sin. Humanity had fallen so far short of God's glory and the place where God wanted them to be that they were lost. And being sinners lost from God they were destined for death. Paul reminds the Romans that the wages of sin is death. The penalty for our wrong doing, the punishment for our sin, is death. It is eternal separation from God. We were

dead. Paul says in Ephesians 2:1 'As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to love when you followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air.'

But Jesus came to bring life to deadness. He came to revive dead human beings. He came to offer life. John 10:10 'I have come that they may have life and life in all its fullness.' Jesus came to shine light into darkness and life into deadness. He came to preach good news and draw people back to God. And he came to die on a cross to save us from our sins. To any who would believe life was on offer. John 5:24 'I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.'

We were dead in sin but Jesus came at Christmas time to this world. He grew up and lived as one of us and then he was rejected by men and nailed to a cross. This was all part of God's purpose. Jesus died that we might live. He died that our sins could be forgiven. He died to bring us new life.

Conclusion

I pray that we won't be found missing the main message this Christmas. I hope that we will not get so caught up in everything else that is going on to remember that Christmas is about Christ. It's not about trees and decorations, food and drink, presents and parties, Santa and the reindeer - it's a celebration of Jesus' birth. John was so eager that we know this that he dispensed with the peripheral matters and concentrated solely on the main message.

Christmas is all about a person - Jesus Christ, one who is eternally God and equally God. And yet one who was willing to lay aside the glories of his heavenly palace to come and live in poverty on this earth. It is about a present - God's greatest gift to the world. Jesus is the maker of creation and the sustainer of creation. He made the world and now he sustains the world. And that person and present had a purpose. Jesus came to bring light into darkness and to bring life into deadness. Jesus came to save us from our sins. That's why the angels said to the shepherds 'Today a Saviour has been born to you - he is Christ the Lord.'

This Christmas don't miss the main message. Be sure that you are saved; that you know Him; that you have passed from death unto life. Be sure this day is about Him and not about anything else. Be sure to give Him the glory He is due today and everyday.

Missing the Arrival: Crowded Rooms and Empty Lives - Luke 2:1-7

As a little girl climbed up onto Santa's lap, Santa asked the usual, 'What would you like for Christmas?'

The child stared at him open mouthed and horrified for a minute, then gasped 'Didn't you get my e-mail?'

For the little girl Santa had obviously missed the arrival of her email. For the people in Bethlehem in Judea at the time of the birth of Jesus they had obviously not paid attention to the words of the prophets years before announcing that a Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. They missed the arrival as well. Caesar Augustus had issued a decree that a census should be held and each should return to his own town to register. Caesar was unaware of course that he was carrying out God's plans and helping to fulfil Old Testament prophecy. God had worked out the time, place and circumstances of the birth of Jesus.

Mary and Joseph were living in Nazareth in Galilee which was about an eighty mile trip to Bethlehem in Judea, the town from which Joseph's family came originally. Now eighty miles does not seem that much to us. We could drive it in under two hours today or take a train journey or a bus trip. For Mary and Joseph it was a long journey – and all the more since Mary was nine months pregnant. But off they went anyway. And when they got to Bethlehem it was so busy that there was no room for them in the inn. They were eventually sent to a stable behind an inn.

The city of Bethlehem was crowded and people were living in crowded rooms. And yet despite the fact the rooms and their lives were so crowded, they were actually living empty lives. Their lives were being lived without Jesus and that makes the human life empty. Jesus came to bring life to us and life in all its fullness. But many missed the arrival of Jesus for they were living in crowded rooms with empty lives. And I want this morning to think just for a short while on missing the arrival: crowded rooms and empty lives.

No Recognition of the Christ of Christmas

That first Christmas people missed the arrival of Jesus for they were staying in crowded rooms. The town was so busy everyone was squashed in where they could find space. Their lives were crowded catching up with old friends and hearing all their news. Their lives were crowded with the plans for trying to register and then get back to their own homes to get on with their business. Everything was crowding around them. And yet in the midst of crowded lives their lives were actually empty. They were not living with God and were now missing the arrival of His Son on earth.

People miss the arrival of Jesus when there is no recognition of the Christ of Christmas. For Mary and Joseph life was tough – and it was about to get tougher. People missed their arrival in town. They went from place to place trying to find a place to stay but everywhere they went the answer came back 'No room.' They were tired and frustrated. And Mary was exhausted. She was carrying her child within her and was due any day now. She needed somewhere to stop and rest. Eventually

someone acknowledged their arrival and their plight and offered them the only space he had – a stable round the back of his inn.

If this man had recognised the Christ of Christmas, if he had noticed Mary was pregnant and had known this was the Son of God, perhaps he would have found them the presidential suite. But failing to recognise he offered them a grimy stable. The people around them as well did not recognise the Christ of Christmas. They saw a man and pregnant women. Even when Jesus was born and laid to rest in that manger wrapped in cloths no-one came to visit. No one came to worship the new born king. No-one recognised him. No-one remembered the prophecies of old.

Today many miss the arrival of Jesus for they do not recognise the Christ of Christmas. Jesus is the Saviour and Lord of this world but many do not recognise him nor acknowledge him. This past week there has been large debate at the Scottish Parliament and among MSPs and indeed among the people of this land over the Parliament's decision to do away with their traditional carol service in order to hold a festive evening. Like so many others in our society they do not recognise the Christ of Christmas. For them Christmas is all about enjoying themselves and getting lots of presents.

People today do not recognise the Christ of Christmas and want him out of our schools, out of our government, out of politics, out of social functions and out of our lives. Lives are so crowded they have no room for Jesus and yet their lives are so empty and they do not recognise their need of him. Are you missing the arrival of Jesus? Do you not recognise the Christ of Christmas?

No Worship of the Christ of Christmas

Not only was there no recognition of Jesus but there was no worship of the Christ of Christmas. Mary and Joseph were shown round to the stable. No-one apart from the inn keeper knew they were there. The time came for the baby to be born and Mary gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in the manger for there was no room for them in the inn. Jesus, the Saviour of the World, was born alone in a stable round the back of the inn out of the way of the world. No-one was there to worship the Christ of Christmas. People were in crowded rooms but the message did not come through. People were in those crowded rooms but their lives were so empty and the one to fill that gap was born and yet no-one went to worship.

Not until the angel appeared to the shepherds on the hillside did anyone know about the baby and come in to the stable to see and worship. And the message is even more astounding when we think that a long time later some wise men came from the East. They had sent him start signifying the birth of Jesus. They had travelled for a long time – months and months to come and see him. Indeed when Herod eventually

learned that he had been outwitted he ordered all the boys under two years of age to be killed. It was a long time before the wise men came.

Jerusalem was the capital for the Jewish people and it was also the centre of the religious hope for the world. The temple was in Jerusalem and people would often make trips to worship God there and make sacrifice there. And yet in Jerusalem, which was a stone's throw from Bethlehem, no-one had heard of the birth of the Christ. When these wise men came asking where the king of the Jews had been born so that they could worship him, the people in Jerusalem were dumbfounded. Herod demanded that his advisors tell him all about the prophecies so that they could answer the question.

Everyone missed the arrival of the Christ of Christmas and no-one worshipped him. We live in crowded rooms today with empty lives and we fail to worship the Christ of Christmas as well. We worship instead Santa Claus, food, presents, parties and even the age old problem of booze. We worship the things that we think will fill our empty lives and yet they never do for long. Are you missing the arrival of Jesus? Do you not worship the Christ of Christmas?

No Time for the Christ of Christmas

Not only was there no recognition of Christ or no worship of him, there was also no time for the Christ of Christmas. People were rushing here and there. Everyone had travelled to their home town. For some it was a short journey for others it took days. People were busy. They had to get there in time to register and then probably had to get back in time to get on with their jobs and lives. They had a living to make. The town of Bethlehem was busy and bustling. People were in crowded rooms squashing into every corner they could. They spent time catching up and exchanging stories – the things you do when you haven't seen each other in years. And still they were living empty lives for they did not have Jesus.

People had no time for Mary and Joseph. The inn keepers had not time to find them a room or even a place to sleep. Their instant response was no room – the crowded rooms tell the story. One inn keeper eventually made time. He made enough time to show them round to his stable and to offer them shelter there. It was dirty and smelly – no time to clean up as his inn was so crowded. Yet this was enough for the young couple. They had each other – and they had God's promise.

When the baby was born people had no time either. Maybe they didn't hear about the baby being born in the stable for there was no room for them in the inn. Maybe, but not likely. Everyone hears about a new baby. Someone would have heard the cries of the little one. Someone must have walked past and noticed. And yet everyone was too busy, no-one made the time. And the shepherds heard, and they went to visit, and they told everyone all about the baby. In verse 17 we learn that they spread the word

concerning what had been told them. People must have heard about the baby. And still there was no time for the Christ of Christmas.

We are all busy too – or at least we claim to be. We do though somehow manage to make time for a cigarette. We make time to buy a lottery ticket. We make time to get the booze in for Christmas. We make time to get that present we've been looking for. We make time for the hairdresser before Christmas. We make time for the party. We make time for the fun.

We claim to be busy though. There is no time for Jesus in our world. There is not time for him in our lives. There is no time for him in our homes. What a shame that we miss out on the most special event of all – the most important gift of all this Christmas. Jesus was born as a babe in the manger – he would grow up to become the Saviour of the world as he hung and suffered and died on the cross. And we make no time for him. The bible says that we need to make time for Jesus today. In 2 Corinthians 6:2 it says 'I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.' What does this mean?

Let me explain very simply to you this great message of good news that the angels told the shepherds about. A Saviour has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord. The world that God created was perfect in every way. Into that world God placed humanity. He gave us our own minds though. He allowed us the ability to choose for ourselves in life. We were free to make our own decisions. Many chose not to make time for God. They began to leave him out of their lives. And when they left him out and forgot about him, they forgot about his guidelines for good living too. And when they did that they began to sin against God. And sin led people into darkness and away from God. So far away in fact that there was no way people could get back to him on their own. And sin not only separated us from God but it came at a price – death. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God the bible teaches, and the wages of sin is death.

Into this situation, because of his great love for us, God sent his own Son into the world. Jesus left the splendour of heaven to come and take on human flesh. He was born as one of us and lived as one of us. And yet he lived without sin. He lived without doing wrong. He was faultless and spotless in every way. And as part of God's plan, Jesus was led to a cross and crucified there. He died on that cross taking the punishment of the world on his back. The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus his Son. Jesus died to save us and redeem us.

God made time for us. And now we have a choice to make time for him. Jesus died to save us but we have to accept that salvation. It is a free gift from God but we have to believe. We have to confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead. We have to turn from living our lives the

way we are and start living them God's way. We say we have no time for the Christ of Christmas but he had time for us. And we learn that now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation. If you do not know Jesus as Lord and Saviour come to him today. Acknowledge him as Lord. Repent and be baptised.

Are you missing the arrival of Jesus? Do you have no time for the Christ of Christmas?

No Gifts for the Christ of Christmas

And finally as people missed the arrival of Jesus with their crowded rooms and empty lives, as they did not recognise him, nor worship him, nor have any time for him, so they had no gifts for the Christ of Christmas either. When we hear of a new baby being born we tend to go out and buy a gift for them – even if it is simply a small token. We want to mark the occasion. We want to lay a pound in the pram. We want to send a card. We want to buy a baby grow.

Since people were staying in crowded rooms and living empty lives, since they were so caught up in the whole census thing, they did not hear about the baby and had no time for him. And having no time for him they did not take gifts to him either. Even the shepherds on the hillside had no gifts – but they did make time. And in many ways they did bring gifts for the Christ of Christmas. The shepherds praised and glorified God on account of the birth of the Saviour of the World.

God gave the most precious gift he could to the world but the world gave nothing back to him in return. This Christmas we will give and receive many presents. Many we will love and adore and will make great use of. And many we will toss to the side and soon discard. The Lord longs for us to bring gifts to him as well. He longs for our worship and adoration. We were made after all to worship him – did you know that. The Westminster Catechism of many years ago records this 'The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.' We were made for the Lord's pleasure. All God wants is for us to be friends with him and to worship him for ever. When the wise men came from the East and found Jesus we read in Matthew 2:11 that they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. They came and gave gifts to him.

We have opportunity to give gifts to Christ this Christmas as well. We will give many gifts to many special people but will we give a gift to Jesus? The greatest gift he wants is our lives. He longs for our worship and adoration. He longs to be our friend and Saviour. He longs that we turn from our crowded rooms and empty lives and ask him to fill that void in our lives. He desire is for us to accept him as Lord and Saviour. Have you done that yet? Will you do that this Christmas?

As well as giving our worship and praise we could give our monetary gifts as well. We have opportunity through the Christmas cards to give to the relief work in Bangladesh to help people there. We have opportunity to buy a Christmas present for the new Church building. We have opportunity to give to the ongoing work of the church. Every little bit helps and every little bit is a gift to God.

We can give our lives and time as well. People made no time for Christ that first Christmas. We can give him our time this year to serve him. We can our lives back to him. Are we missing the arrival of Jesus? Do you have no gifts for the Christ of Christmas?

Conclusion

We can easily live empty lives by crowding our rooms with anything other than Christ. And we do that regularly. We fill our lives with parties and presents, with food and festivities, with family and friends, with Santa and stockings, with drink and with drugs, with everything apart from Jesus. We can keep the debris out of our lives though if we recognise the Christ of Christmas and worship him this Christmas time, and if we give time and gifts to him. Do not miss the arrival of the King of kings and Lord of lords. Do not miss the arrival of the Saviour in your life this Christmas.

Not Missing the Moment - Luke 2:8-20

Sleepless in Seattle has always been up there with the best of the romantic films. Even I enjoyed it. It tells the story of a widower struggling to come to terms with loss of his wife and bringing up a young son. One Christmas Eve the young boy calls a radio phone in show and asks for help for his dad who is struggling. On hearing the show and hearing the widower eventually speak about his life, his problems and his pain, she feels a bond with him. She tries to find out who he is and where he lives.

Anyway in the end they are to meet up on top of the Empire State Building as is arranged between his son and the woman. He rushes to find his son who has gone missing and gets him at the top. They wait around for a while and then the lift operator calls time and they all have to leave. It appears they may be missing the moment here. They get on the lift to go down. AT the same time the young lady has persuaded the other lift operator to take her up even though it is closing time. She reaches the top and all have gone – she has missed the moment.

But of course all ends well for the little boy has left his teddy and he and dad go back up to get it and there she is and the moment has not been missed after all.

So often in life though we miss the moment as well. And particularly at this season of the year when everything is so manic we sometimes miss the moment to do something or to say something or to learn something. This Christmas my hope is that we will not be found missing the moment. Christmas is a time for many things and we don't want

to miss them this year. Let's have a look at the account of the shepherds and see how they did not miss the moment and made time for the Saviour of the world.

A Time for Going Home

The Christmas message begins of course with a time for going home. Let us just set the scene for this story once more. Joseph was living in Nazareth with his bride to be Mary. Mary had become pregnant through a miracle of God. God came by his Spirit and placed his son, our Lord Jesus within her womb. She was a virgin pledged to be married. This news of pregnancy was not good for Joseph.

He decided to divorce Mary quietly so as not to place too much stress on her and not to disgrace her too much. He was an honest and upright man. And despite the situation he found himself in he was compassionate toward the lady he loved. God came to him in a dream and explained what was happening and that he should indeed marry Mary. When Joseph awoke he did as God had said to him.

At that time though the ruling emperor, Caesar Augustus, wanted to find out who everyone was in order to know how many people there were and also in order to tax them better and more. He wanted everyone to go home to their own town. And so Joseph and Mary went home. He went home to the ancient home of his ancestors. And as we know this was all in keeping with the prophecies of old that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. That first Christmas, Joseph and Mary made time for going home.

Christmas is a time when many of us go home as well. We go home to our families for the festive season. We go home to spend the day with them, to give and receive gifts, to eat together and talk together and share together. And that is all special. Our love for one another is shared and so a moment is not missed when we go home and spend time with our families. It is a time to share the true meaning of Christmas as well. If they are not believers it is an opportunity to share in simple ways the message of Christmas and the real reason for our celebrations.

And in the midst of this message this morning I want to encourage some here to make time for going home. And I don't mean home to your ancestral home or to your family – although that may be appropriate too. I want to encourage you as you listen to God this morning and to the message of his love wrapped up in the Christmas message to think about coming home. It may be that you are a little like the prodigal son who wandered off and it is time now to come back home – to come back to God. Listen for that call home this morning as we continue in his word. Do not be found missing the moment today of coming home to Jesus.

A Time for Giving

So Mary and Joseph made time for going home that first Christmas. Christmas is not only a time for going home it is also a time for giving. And that first Christmas the first Christmas gift was given. God gave his gift of love to the world. God gave his only son to the world.

As we read the passage in Luke 2 we realise that the shepherds were out on the hillside minding their own business doing what they were employed to do. They were looking after their sheep by night. They were guarding them from all harm. As they sat and watched, maybe talking to one another and enjoying the banter of friendship, they suddenly saw a bright light and the glory of the Lord surrounding an angel. They were terrified we read – and who can blame them – after all it is not every day you see an angel!

The angel had come to share some great news with these shepherds. The angel came to tell them that a Saviour had been born to them and that he was Christ the Lord. They were then given very specific detail to identify the baby when they found him. The angel gave them a sign. 'You will find a baby wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger.' This baby was no ordinary baby. This scene was no ordinary scene. Not many babies were born in stables and laid to sleep in mangers. This baby was the Saviour. This baby born in Bethlehem was the fulfilment of God's promise made years before.

And this babe was no ordinary child due to the angelic announcements made prior to his birth. In Luke 1 as the angel Gabriel came to tell Mary the news that she was to be with child. She explained how Mary had found favour with God. Gabriel explained that the child would be the son of the most high God. He instructed Mary about naming the boy Jesus. The name Jesus is of course the Greek form of Joshua which means the Lord saves. Mary learned about her high calling from God.

And then of course there was the angelic announcement to Joseph in his dream. He was informed that Mary was pregnant not by another man but by a miracle of God. Joseph too was told what name to give the child. 'Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.'

This was nor ordinary child. This was God's Son, Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, the one who would save people from their sin. This was God's love gift to the world. John 3:16 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.' Jesus was God's love gift to the world. God wanted to save the world and draw humanity back to him. The only for this to be possible was for Jesus to come in human flesh.

Christmas is a time for giving. The angels announced the great gift of God. The shepherds made time for giving too. When they heard the news from the angels they

decided to leave their flocks for a while and head into Bethlehem to see these things the angel had been talking about.

When they reached the stable, they found Jesus just as they had been told. And they gave him their worship and praise. They gave to Mary the news of all that had happened to them and she was amazed and treasured it all up in her heart. They made time for giving. They had nothing else to give to Jesus. They had no money or possessions with them – they probably didn't have many possessions anyway for they were lowly shepherds. But they gave the best they could – they gave themselves in worship.

At Christmas time we give as well. We give presents to people who by and large do not need them. We spend ages trying to work out what to give them for they have everything anyway. What we give they may like or they may not. But we give out of a heart of love and we give because often they will have given to us as well. God gave us a great and wonderful gift – he gave us his own son. What will we give in return? We may want to try and think of the best possession we have. We may want to give some or all of our money. The only gift God really wants from us is our soul. He wants us to give our very lives back to him. He wants us to love him and trust him and follow him all the days of our lives. Christmas – a time for giving – will you give your life to Jesus this year? Do not be found missing the moment to give your life this Christmas.

A Time for Glad Tidings

Christmas is also a time for glad tidings. When the angel first appeared to the shepherds on the hillside this is what he said 'I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.' I bring you glad tidings. I bring you good news. This is not one of our TV news reports which are only ever full of bad news. This was an angel bringing great and happy news. And Christmas is a celebration of great news for Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

It is interesting to note that the word for 'I bring' comes from the same word in Greek that we get evangelise from ('Euangellion'). And of course in some ways the angel was evangelising for he brought news of salvation. He came to announce that a Saviour had been born. He told the shepherds that the long awaited Messiah had come. This was indeed great and glorious news. It was a time for glad tidings.

And glad tidings brought to humble shepherds as well. These men were the lowest of the low of the low in the day. They were hardworking and honest men, but many saw them as outcasts for they were left out in the fields. They were dirty and smelly. And yet they had such an important job. They were the ones who were raising the sheep and lambs that would be used as sacrificial offerings in the temple. They were often not spoken to by anyone and left out on their own. And God chose to come firstly to these men and share the glad tidings. It was a message of hope for them.

God cared about them. God wanted them to know about the Saviour who had been born.

And that message of hope, those glad tidings, is still true today. We may look around on a dark and difficult world, a world that seems at time out of control, a world where people are stuck in the habits of drink and drugs, of partying and pornography, a world which is predominately evil but God is still in control. He gave us hope over two thousand years ago when he gave his gift of love to the world. You feel without hope this morning for you are a sinful person. You may think you are too far gone for God to care and for God to do something. Hear this. He already has done something. He gave his son as a gift to the world. Jesus was born as a babe in the manger but the great news, the glad tidings, is that he grew to become a man, and as a man he was led to the cross and nailed to it. He died that our sins could be forgiven. He died to set us free from the habits which bind us. He died that we could live. The message of hope is still ringing true. The glad tidings are there for us to hear. Do not be found missing the moment today to hear the glad tidings.

A Time for Amazing Grace

And of course as we continue thinking on these matters we realise Christmas is a time for amazing grace. The world had turned so far from God that we simply ignored him. Yet God by his grace came to earth in human form as his Son Jesus Christ.

How amazing to think that God loves us that much that he would give his own son to us? That Jesus would leave behind the glories of heaven and come to earth to live as a human being. That he was willing to suffer like we suffer and to be tempted like we are tempted. And then that he was willing to die like we die and yet in even worse circumstances. God's amazing grace expressed at Christmas as he gave his own love gift to the world.

These shepherds were the first to hear the news of this new arrival. They were hardworking and honest men, but no doubt dirty and smelly, and possibly even uncouth and vulgar. They did not deserve to be the first to hear – and yet God by his grace allowed them to hear before anyone else. Maybe God should have told the priests first or the religious leaders. Maybe he should have told the rich and the educated. I don't know but what I do know is that by his amazing grace he shared it first with the shepherds. And in sharing it first with them there is a message that he would share that kind of news with me too – for I am lowly and humble and I am so undeserving as well.

Which of us deserves God's amazing grace? None of us the Scriptures tell us. We are all sinners. We are all undeserving. And yet it is by grace we have been saved, through faith, not by works so that none may boast. God reached down from heaven we could

do nothing on our own. He gave his love gift to the world. He gave us his son, our Saviour.

Christmas is a time to remember amazing grace. Do not be found missing the moment of receiving his amazing grace this Christmas

A Time for Glorifying God

And finally Christmas is a time for glorifying God. The angels on the hillside that night glorified God. After the first angel had shared the glad tidings with the shepherds a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel. And they all glorified God. 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.' The angels were praising God. They knew who he was and what he was doing. They spent time around his throne in heaven. They saw his glory and they glorified him now in front of the shepherds.

The shepherds too found it was a time for glorifying God. They left their flocks and headed to Bethlehem. They found Jesus just as they had been told and they were so excited by this they told everyone they saw what was going on. Mary was amazed and treasured up all she saw and heard. And then note verse 20. After the shepherds had spent time with the baby and his family, they returned to their hillside 'glorifying and praising God'. They praised him for all they had heard from the angels and for all they had seen as they went to that stable. Everything they heard they saw. They gave thanks to God and glorified him now.

They glorified him not only by their praise and worship, but with the fact that their praise and worship included sharing with others the great news. They told everyone they met what they had heard and seen. They told everyone about this new baby. They told everyone about the Saviour of the world. Are we as quick to do likewise?

They glorified God in everything they did that day. And we are called to glorify God all of the time. The shorter Westminster Catechism 'The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.' 1 Corinthians 10:31 says 'whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.' Do not be found missing the moment to glorify God this Christmas.

Conclusion

In Sleepless in Seattle the man and lady almost missed the moment. My prayer this Christmas is that we will not be found missing the moment. Christmas is an opportunity to praise and glorify God. At this season of the year we have opportunity to remember what Christmas is actually all about. And in learning what it is all about we can realise hopefully that there is more to Christmas and more to life.

Christmas is a time for going home. Many of us do that with family and friends and that is great. Maybe this Christmas you have to go home and mend broken relationships. Or maybe this Christmas the broken relationship that needs mended is your relationship with God. This is a time for going home. Come to Jesus. Accept God's love gift to the world.

Christmas is a time for giving. God gave us his gift of love that first Christmas - he gave us his son our Saviour. The Shepherds gave their worship in return. What will you give this Christmas? Will you give your very life to Jesus for the first time - or for the umpteenth?

Christmas is a time for glad tidings. The angel came and announced the great news that a Saviour had come to earth. The Messiah was here. Have you heard the glad tidings and responded to God? Are you sharing those glad tidings with others this Christmas?

Christmas is a time for amazing grace. God amazingly and graciously gave us his own son all those years ago. We did not deserve anything but punishment for the way we were behaving and the things we had and were doing. But God nevertheless gave us his son to take our place and be our Saviour. Will you accept that amazing grace? Will you thank God for that amazing grace? Will you tell others of that amazing grace?

Christmas is a time for glorifying God. Are you glorifying this Christmas or are you too caught up in everything else that world distracts you with - shops, gifts, decorations, food, parties and family?

Do not be found missing the moment this Christmas. Make time for going home, for giving, for glad tidings, for amazing grace and for glorifying God. He is worthy of all our praise. Make time for Jesus this Christmas for he is the reason for the season.

More to Christmas...More to Life

At a small Primary School three six-year olds were playing the wise men in the school nativity play. As they came up to Mary and Joseph at the stable, the first one handed over his present and said 'Gold.' The second presented his gift and said 'Myrrh.' The third one then gave them his treasure and said 'And Frank sent this!'

It is so easy to forget your lines or to muddle them up. Sadly though in our world today many do not know what Christmas is all about. They are so caught up in presents and parties, food and festivities, Santa and snow that they miss the real point and in missing the point they miss life in all its fullness.

The holiday season is, for many people, one of the most depressing times of the year. In fact, the suicide rate is higher between Christmas and New Year than at any other

time during the year. It is easy to get so caught up in the preparations and the festivities and even the pain we may feel in our hearts during the holidays that we forget the real meaning of the season.

It isn't about gifts and trees and decorations. It isn't even about families and parties and fun. It certainly isn't about Santa Claus, snowmen, elves and reindeer. It is all about Jesus and all about Him alone! So for just a few minutes tonight let's leave our world behind and visit once again the little town of Bethlehem. Let's let Jesus transform our Christmas.

The night God became flesh and walked among men ranks as one of the greatest moments in human history. It was a night of tremendous miracles and great blessings. It was the night when God moved into the world to live and eventually to die. Though this story is 2,000 years old, it is still as fresh to me as if this were the first time I had ever heard it.

It is about a Person...just not Santa Claus or us!

Christmas is about a person...just not Santa Claus or us. Yes Santa is a great Christmas figure and one for the kids to enjoy. Yes families are important and each friend we have as well. But these are not the people Christmas is all about. And yet at times that is exactly what we make it. We concentrate on ourselves and think only of ourselves.

I want a Wii. I want a Playstation 3. I want a new car. I want turkey. I want a peaceful Christmas without family feuds. I want. And everything has to revolve around us. Where we go and what we do depends on me and my feelings and desires and wants. And suddenly the season is about a person - me!

Christmas is about a person though. And his name is Jesus. Over 2000 years ago a baby was born in Bethlehem. This birth had been predicted many years beforehand and people were looking forward to it. People were looking forward to the Messiah coming. He was the one to be king of the Jews. He was the one to rule the world. He was the one to save the people from their horrible lives. And yet when this baby was born in Bethlehem nobody noticed him. No-one recognised him. Not many came to visit.

The angel Gabriel had appeared to Mary, a teenager and a virgin who was pledged to be married to a nice and caring man called Joseph. They did things right. No sleeping together before marriage. And yet the angel announced to Mary that she would be with child and she was to call him Jesus. Mary questioned all of this of course and found out that God was at work and that God would send his Holy Spirit upon her and she would conceive a child. Mary was amazed and thrilled and honoured to be God's chosen servant.

Joseph was an upright man and when he heard this news he wanted to divorce Mary silently and without any undue fuss. He wanted to protect her. And an angel appeared to him and explained the situation as well. This child Mary has conceived and carries is from God. It is his plan. This baby is a special child. He is to be called Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.

And so the baby was born in a stable in Bethlehem. The town was so busy there was no room for them anywhere. But they found a spot and the child was born and wrapped in cloths and laid to sleep in a manger. A manger – the feeding trough for the animals. This special child was born. He was Jesus. He was the Son of God. He was the Messiah. He was the one who grow to save the world.

Christmas is all about a person – it is all about Jesus, God's own Son, our Saviour. Let's not forget that this Christmas.

It is about a Present...just not all our Gifts under the Tree!

Christmas is also about a present...just not all our gifts under the tree. We give and receive many presents at this time of year. I was reading the other day on the BBC news site that the average we will spend on presents is £355. What a staggering amount of money. And for many they will spend an awful lot more.

It is great to receive presents – we all enjoy getting gifts and unwrapping them and enjoying them. Some we will enjoy more than others but how great is it before Christmas to see all the presents under the tree.

Christmas is all about a present but it's just not about the presents we think it is. The greatest present we could ever have, was given to us over 2000 years ago. God gave his gift of love to the world. He sent his own Jesus to earth. Jesus left the glories of heaven and came to take on frail human flesh. He came to live as one of us. He came to feel what we feel. He came to suffer like we suffer. He came to be tempted like we are tempted. And guess what? Not once did he complain and not once did he give into temptation either.

God showered his love upon us as he sent his own son to earth. The shepherds on the hillside heard the angel's message. 'Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.' Born to you. To you. You. The shepherds heard the astounding news that this baby who was born in a stable and laid to sleep in a manger was a gift for them. The Saviour of the world, the baby Jesus the person we have thought of, was God's present to each one of us.

Christmas is all about a present – it is all God's gift of love to us, it is about Jesus, God's own Son, our Saviour. Let's not forget that this Christmas.

It is about a Purpose...just not the Family Get Together and the Food!

And Christmas is about a purpose...just not the family get-together and the food. We think that Christmas is a time for family and friends. We have grown up believing it is about receiving gifts. We have grown up believing it is about families travelling and gathering together to celebrate the festive period. We believe it is about sitting around the crowded dinner table in the afternoon eating turkey and stuffing our faces with everything that goes along with it. We think the purpose of Christmas is getting stuffed with food and drunk with wine and then having a family argument or two.

That is not the purpose of Christmas. Oh it might seem like that in your household but that is not what was intended. Christmas is about a purpose. The purpose was God's gift to the world. And we have thought about that present and that person but what of the purpose. Why did God give a gift of love to the world? And why then?

God had made the perfect world. Everything was just right. Then he made us and gave us our own minds so we could make our own decisions in life. That's where things started to go wrong. We began to ignore God. We began to do things contrary to his instructions for good living. And before long we had forgotten all about him and were left in all the debris we had brought upon our lives. When we did all of those things we sinned against God. That is the word for doing wrong and for disobeying God – sin. And sin messed up our world big time. People were fighting and not living in peace. Their lives were messed up in other ways. They wanted help but just didn't know how to get it.

Into that situation God decided to intervene. God decided to come to earth and live among us and show us how to live good and proper lives. He sent his own son Jesus to this earth. That person of Christmas was God's present to us. And the purpose was for him to grow up as one of us. To see the world like we see it. To experience the pain we feel. To feel the joys we experience. To endure the heartache we do. And Jesus saw all of that. He also knew what it was like to be tempted to do wrong like we are – but he never gave into it. His purpose was to show us how much God loved us. So much he was willing to send his own Son to earth.

Jesus grew up and lived a perfect life but then died a criminal's death. And this too was part of the purpose. God knew that the only way to save us was for Jesus to take the punishment for our wrong doing. Jesus died that we might live. Jesus died that we might be forgiven. Jesus died that we might enter heaven one day. God had a purpose. The purpose of Christmas was for Jesus to come to earth in human form and then to grow to die on the cross to save us.

Christmas is all about a purpose – it is all about Jesus, God's own Son, our Saviour. Let's not forget that this Christmas.

Christmas is Christ...Christmas is Life

Christmas then is Christ and Christmas is life. You see the person of Christmas is not us nor our family or friends or even dear old Santa Claus. The person of Christmas is Jesus Christ, God's own Son come to take on human flesh and live among us. The present of Christmas is not that Wii we have been desperately wanting or indeed any of the other gifts under our trees. The present of Christmas is God's gift of love to the world. It is that babe born in the manger. It is the Saviour born to you. And the purpose of Christmas is not the family get-togethers however great they happen to be nor the food we eat. The purpose of Christmas is God giving his gift of love the world. It is Jesus taking on human flesh and living among us. It is Jesus ultimately growing up and dying on a cross to save us.

Christmas is Christ. He is the real reason for the season. He is what it is all about. There is more to Christmas than what we usually experience. There is more than family, food, presents, parties, Santa and snow. There is Jesus, the person, present and purpose of Christmas. And when we come to recognise that Christmas is Christ, and when we worship him at Christmas and all year round then Christmas becomes life to us. Jesus said 'I have come that you may have life and life in all its fullness.' To enjoy that life this Christmas, come to Jesus and accept God's gift of love.

Christmas is Christ...Christmas is life.

Not Missing the Sign - Matthew 2:1-12

I received a new DVD for Christmas - no surprises there is there due to my liking for films! It was called Evan Almighty and was a follow up to Bruce Almighty which was out a number of years back. The story centres around a weatherman called Evan Baxter who is happily married with 3 sons. He is just leaving his job to take up the role as a new congressman at Capitol Hill. As the family move into their new home - a big and fancy one - his wife comes to bed one night telling him the kids wanted to pray so they had all prayed. He asked his wife what she had prayed for and she said that they would be closer as a family and have more time for each other. She suggested he ought to pray as well.

A little later that is what he does. He prays asking God to help him change the world for that was his election pledge. The next morning he is awoken at 6.14. And this time comes around each morning and he can't understand it. His new registration plate for his car is GEN 614 and various other things appear with that number. He is missing the sign until he meets God who tells him he wants him to build an ark. Suddenly he realises that 6 14 and GEN 614 mean a bible verse. He finds his bible and discovers the verse where Noah is told to make himself an ark.

After much debating and trying to ignore God he eventually misses the sign no more and gets on with the job in hand. And I'll not spoil any more of the film for you. Evan

missed the sign for a good while but eventually was found not missing the sign. I pray as this festive period draws to a close and as this year draws to an end that we will not be found missing the sign.

2,000 years ago there were 3 gentlemen who had seen a sign in the sky and had not missed the sign and followed it. These Magi were probably astrologers from the East. They had seen a star, a new star in the sky and realised it meant something special. They decided to follow it, hoping that it would lead them to a royal palace and a new born king.

Following Faithfully

The first thing we learn this morning then is that these wise men were following faithfully. They had been outside gazing up into the skies was their custom and practice – and more importantly their job when this new star had appeared. Quite how they recognised that this new star meant a new king of the Jews had been born is a mystery. And yet like every other part of this great mystery of God coming to earth and taking on frail human flesh and living among us, it is amazing. Angels have been instrumental thus far in the Christmas story – an angel spoke to Mary to tell her the great news that she had been chosen by God to carry his Son; an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream instructing him to take Mary as his wife and not divorce her and to name the baby Jesus; an angel and then a host of them appeared to the shepherds on the hillside bringing them the great news. An angel of the Lord could have appeared to these men or God could have used other means for them to know this was a special star. Whatever the reason they followed faithfully.

These men left behind their wives and families, their friends and their jobs, and their dreams and plans to follow this star and find the new king. It was a long and tiring journey. It was a journey that was to take them many months. They will have missed their families and friends. I doubt their employers would even have kept their jobs open this long – it was one long career break.

How do I know it was so long? And did they not appear the same night as the shepherds? Let's tidy up this Christmas story which we have traditionally learned and heard about. Let's not miss the signs in Scripture which signpost for us the actual timings of this season of the year. In verse 1 of chapter 2 we read these words 'After Jesus was born in Bethlehem.' This tells us that some time after Jesus was born the wise men came. Now of course that could mean anything. It could mean immediately after or a good time after.

Read further on in verse 7 'Herod called the Magi secretly and found out the exact time the star had appeared.' Herod wanted to work out the precise time the baby was born. He recognised these men had been travelling. They had told him as much. They had come from the East. Traditionally it is thought they had come from Persia. This

was a reasonable distance away. Particularly in those days when there were no cars or trains or airplanes. They would have had to walk or ride on the back of horses or camels.

And then if we jump down to verse 16 we get a feel for the length of time these men had been on their journey. 'When Herod realised he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.' Two years or under. Now Herod probably wasn't taking any chances and erred on the side of caution here so the two years may be a bit long but the sign is there for us to see and piece together the story. From the time these three wise men saw the star in the East until they arrived in Jerusalem at Herod's royal palace and then when they reached the house in Bethlehem where Mary and Joseph were, Jesus had grown to be a toddler. He was probably between a year and a half and two years old.

Going back to our traditional Christmas scenes, the wise men could not have been at the stable at the same time as the shepherds – they were a year or two behind them in reaching the new born king. And yet the message is still the same. These men gave up everything to come and find the new born king. They had journeyed long and hard. And make no mistake about the journey would have had its ups and downs especially if it lasted as long as we think it did.

They could have got fed up with each others company. They would have argued over who was leading the way. They will have missed their families. They may have encountered rough and ragged terrain. They will have slipped and fallen. They may have been attacked by bandits or had to find ways to avoid them. They may have even run out of food and had to find ways of getting more food for themselves. Their journey was long and hard. And yet they followed faithfully. They had seen the star, they recognised what it meant and they wanted to see this new king. And they followed faithfully through thick and thin to get there to see him.

We are called in life not to miss the sign either. And we are called to follow faithfully. Jesus came as John tells us in his gospel as a light shining into the darkness. He came to illuminate our lives and to show us our sin and wrongdoing, and in so doing to show us a better way as well. His life was a sign from God for us. He was born as a babe in the manger and grew to live as one of us. He preached good news to poor, proclaimed freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind; he came to release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18) Jesus came to show us how to live and he healed people along the way. Then he went to the cross of Calvary and hung and suffered and died for you and me. Signs from God.

And there are so many recorded for us. We are returning in a few weeks time to John's gospel to continue our series from the first part of last year 'That you may believe...and by believing you may have life.' In John 2:11 we read these words 'this, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory and his disciples put their faith in him.' John was clear in his gospel that he wanted to show us the signs of Jesus at work. And why did he want to do that? He did that throughout his gospel so that we may believe and through believing that we may have life. The catchphrase for the series comes from John 20:30 and 31 'Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.'

Let us not miss the signs given by God and recorded in Scripture for us. And may we be a people who will follow faithfully wherever we go, in whatever we do, and in whatever circumstances we encounter. The magi from the East followed faithfully until they reached Herod and then followed the star further until they reached Bethlehem and found the house where Mary and Joseph were with Jesus. They followed faithfully until they found what they were looking for.

Worshipping Wholeheartedly

Not only did these wise men follow faithfully but they went on to worship wholeheartedly. **Read verse 9-11.** And of course there is another sign of the age of Jesus and the time it had taken these magi to complete their journey. Jesus is not referred to as a babe here – as he was when the shepherds heard about the birth from the angel – but as a child. He has grown some since his birth. He is probably a toddler now, aged between one and two.

But notice what these magi did on first arriving at the house. They saw the child with his mother Mary and they recognised who he was. They knew this was the new king of the Jews they were to see. This was the one about whom the star had led them and guided them. He may have been a small child. He and his parents may have been living in small house and not a large and lavish palace but still they recognised the one they had come to see.

And then they bowed down and worshipped him. There was no standing on ceremony. No working out if this was the one. No pride in their own positions. They got down and worshipped this king. They worshipped Jesus. And this is all the more remarkable when you consider they had come from a foreign land. They had no allegiance to the Jews. They did not come under the rule of the king of the Jews. Any king of the Jews had no jurisdiction where they lived. And yet they recognised this child as being special and from God and they worshipped him. And note that it is only Jesus they worship. Mary is mentioned and is there but they worshipped him – Jesus. No mention of Joseph either although undoubtedly he would be around as well and still has his

part to play in the escape to Egypt. They centre their worship on Jesus – it is all about him. And that is the same for us. It is not about the preacher, or the building, or the signs...it is all about Jesus and we should be worshipping him alone.

They worshipped him wholeheartedly. They gave him their all in praise and worship. They didn't give a token nod or a half bow; they bowed right down before him. No Cherie Blair with her little courtesy to the Queen. More like a Sarah Brown full courtesy and bow before her majesty. These men had given up so much to follow the star and find the king. They had journeyed long and hard. And now they gave themselves in wholehearted worship to Jesus.

When we come to worship Jesus is it with our whole hearts as well or do we hold some back? Do we give a token courtesy like Cherie Blair or do we give a full courtesy and bow like Sarah Brown?

It is hard to always feel the same way in life. We go through many circumstances which change us and shape us. There are times of real joy when all we want to do is praise the Lord with all our hearts and we do worship wholeheartedly. There are other times when our life is so painful that we cannot bring ourselves to give our all. Instead we still come and worship but it is a token gesture. But that is OK – for I believe the Lord recognises these times in our lives and takes our worship however it is given. But he does long for our complete and wholehearted worship.

And check out what wholehearted means. Marked by unconditional commitment, unstinting devotion, or unreserved enthusiasm. These wise men gave their all in worship. As we come to worship God week by week may this coming year see a time when we give our wholehearted worship to him each time we gather. And may our worship be wholehearted every day as well even when we are alone and not in church.

Giving Gratefully

Not only were these magi following faithfully and worshipping wholeheartedly, they were also giving gratefully. They had journeyed for close on two years. They had packed up their stuff to bring with them and in so doing they had brought treasure with them as gifts for the new born king. They were expecting royalty in a palace and came prepared with lavish gifts. They had carried these all the way. They had not sold them or exchanged them for food along the way. They had kept them as gifts for the king.

After they had bowed down and worshipped Jesus, recognising now that he was more than a king born in a royal palace, they (verse 11) opened their treasures and presented him with gifts. These were special and important gifts. Described as treasures means they were valuable, both financially and materially as well as sentimentally.

These gifts had been thought out as well and so the magi gave them gratefully for they had found the king the star had told them about and the star had led them too. They had not missed the sign and they found what they were looking for. How grateful they were that they found Jesus.

And so they gave their treasure to Jesus, to this new born king. And let's consider what they gave just briefly. They presented him with gifts of gold. Gold is the most often mentioned valued metal in Scripture. As in our day it was prized throughout the ancient world. It was used as a medium of exchange as well as for jewellery, ornaments and dining instruments for royalty. If you were to give a gift to a king it would be gold.

Then they gave incense or more accurately frankincense. This was derived from a gummy resin from a special tree. When burned it gave a sweet odour. Frankincense was used as a perfume in the secular world but for the Jews it was used ceremonially as part of the recipe for the only incense permitted on the altar. How apt them that the gift of frankincense came to the King of kings to God's own Son who would one day do away with the need for sacrifices on the altar as he gave his own life as a ransom for many.

And lastly the gift of myrrh. Myrrh too comes from a tree – the resin, gum and oil. It also gives off a smell which is characteristic. It was sold wither as a liquid or in solid form. It too was used in incense and as a perfume. It was also used as a stimulant tonic. But of course it is best known for its use in the embalming process of the dead body. Jews did not practice full embalming of corpses but a dead body was prepared for burial by washing, dressing in special garments, and packing it with fragrant myrrh to stifle the smell of a body as it decayed. Another apt gift for a king who would one day die whilst still young in order to save his people from their sins.

These gifts were special and were given gratefully to Jesus, the king of the Jews. The magi had travelled long and far but at last they had found what they were looking for. They had followed the star and it had led them directly to Jesus. They were giving gratefully for this special privilege of being able to worship the new born king.

What of us? Do we give gratefully to the King of kings and Lord of lords? We have seen the signs as well – not just of his birth but of his life and his death – and yes of his coming again. How do we respond? Are we like the magi? Are we giving gratefully to the king? These wise men gave their treasures to the king. They were valuable and thought out. I trust this morning as we gave in the offering we thought out what we would give and gave gratefully for all that God gives to us. And of course he looks not for our material gifts but he looks for us to give gratefully of our very lives.

Conclusion

These magi saw the star in the sky and they followed it. They did not miss the sign of a new born king. They followed faithfully through thick and thin and for a long time to see the person the sign was pointing them too. They followed faithfully and found Jesus.

These wise men did not miss the sign and found Jesus in Bethlehem. On finding him and seeing him with their eyes, they bowed down and worshipped him wholeheartedly. They gave their all in worship. They recognised who it was before them and worshipped.

These three guys did not miss the sign and were able to worship the king of kings. They were also able to give gratefully to him of their treasures. They were so glad to be able to worship this new king.

I pray that we have seen the signs this Christmas and not missed them. That we have recognised that Christmas is about Christ and that we have worshipped him. And in realising this we have found that there is more to Christmas and more to life. There are so many signs that God gives us telling us of his love for us that we do not want to miss them. This coming year we will see more of them as we read and study his word together through John's gospel in particular. Let us be a people who follow faithfully, who worship wholeheartedly and who give gratefully. Let us not miss the signs and follow Jesus always. Let us find that life that he wants to give us - that life in all its abundance and fullness.

Do not miss the signs - more to Christmas...more to life.

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