

# CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

## WEEK 1 : TREES

### **Christmas is coming and the goose is getting fat Please put a penny in the old man's hat**

Well at least I know David hasn't forgotten this old rhyme!! As he said on Sunday, the hype is already well under way. And we will hear again and again the refrain of the Church of the commercialisation of Christmas and how it has lost its real meaning. There just might be a grain of truth in this cartoon - 'Christmas has ruined the meaning of shopping.' But since commerce will not bring home the real meaning of Christmas, it will be up to Christians themselves to make sure it is never forgotten. There is also a more insidious worldly view of Christmas as Karen has already found out. There will be people claiming Christmas is only a pagan festival dressed up for Christians. Now there is truth in this claim because, people in the ancient world did hold ceremonies around the shortest day of the year as we will hear about later, just as the Druids celebrate the longest day at Stonehenge today. However, according to the calendar in use at the time, the early church calculated December as the nearest estimate of when Jesus was born. It never claimed that 25<sup>th</sup> December was His actual date of birth. Only that it was the appropriate time to celebrate His birth. So our word 'Christmas' is a contraction of 'Christ's mass' i.e, a communion service. This challenge about dates can be answered by asking which calendar are people going by because this is an excellent example of the Irish saying – If you can't convince them, confuse them!

### **Julius Caesar 45BC**

**Still used by the Eastern Orthodox Church for liturgical year. And by some North African peoples.**

**1<sup>st</sup> January in Julian calendar is 14<sup>th</sup> January in Gregorian calendar.**

### **Gregorian calendar 1582**

**10 days dropped from the Julian calendar and also the number of leap years. Century years are no longer counted as a leap year unless it is divisible by 4.**

These sorts of accusations of Christians taking over a pagan festival do put Christians on the spot, and at such times we need to be able to show, that regardless of what pagan activities took place at that time of the year in the ancient world, Christians celebrate for completely different reasons and in accordance with the teaching of the New Testament. The birth of the Saviour of the world was a gift from God to the world. Christmas is a celebration commemorating that event - and it is the event that is significant, not the day or

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

the date on which it happened. Hopefully, these three talks will help us to celebrate this event for the Christian reasons which are often so contrary to how the world views them.

I'm starting with trees. As some of you know from a previous occasion, I'm rather partial to trees. Admittedly trees were part of pagan ceremonies and Christians have been challenged by verses like Jeremiah 10:2-4 means having a Christmas tree is a pagan custom, which is forbidden for Christians. But what is forbidden in this whole chapter is the pagan **worship** of such adorned trees and other man made idols – and the one thing Christians do not do is worship their Christmas trees! The legend about St Boniface, a missionary monk from Devonshire shows us the difference. He is often called the 'Apostle of Germany' because he went there in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, became the Bishop of Mainz and played a major, largely positive, role in the religious and political situation of the time. Story goes that at a winter solstice – the shortest day of the year - he came upon oak tree worshippers who were about to sacrifice a young boy. There are various versions of what happened next, but the upshot was that Boniface cut down the oak and either planted a fir tree or drew attention to a small fir tree that was growing behind the huge oak tree. He used that tree to preach Christianity to those people and he encouraged them to bring the tree into their homes at Christmas to remind them of the gospel he preached.

Because this story is regarded as legend, we have no record of what was actually taught. The only details contained in the various stories is that he used its triangular shape to teach about the Trinity. The evergreen foliage in his day were symbols of peace and immortality and he used this as illustration of the blessings of eternal life in Christ. Then the arrow like nature of the tree, like a cathedral spire pointed heavenwards. I'm going to go along these lines and I suppose I'd better give you notice now that that this talk probably won't fit in with your ideas about a Christmas Bible study. However, all that follows is the result of Christ coming into our world at Christmas.

Firstly, from the triangular shape of the tree we can speak of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Take away any line from a triangle and it ceases to be one. And there are some good reasons why it is appropriate to talk about this at Christmas. It is appropriate because the birth of Christ is the first event in the Bible that explicitly brings together the joint activity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Take away any part of the activity of the Godhead, and the Christ event loses its credibility. This fact alone indicates that the coming of Jesus into the world was of momentous importance. So, it is appropriate to remind ourselves at Christmas that this time was start of the fourth Day of the Lord, the day in which we are still living. It is appropriate because the birth of Christ brought to an end 400 years of prophetic silence and

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

marked a Scriptural departure from the monotheistic beliefs of the Jews – that is, believing in God as one Person. It is appropriate because Jesus birth was the moment in time when God gave His final revelation of Himself. It is appropriate because God had decided that He would henceforth speak through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. That was the decision that determined that henceforth Christians would worship a triune God – the rock which underpins Christianity and makes it distinct from all other religions.

Christmas is the time we remember God the Son set aside His heavenly divine attributes to come into this world as a helpless baby. A helpless baby destined to die in humiliation on a cross. Had God not determined that salvation was to be achieved by this method and been willing to bear that burden Himself – we would not be celebrating Christmas. God’s plan of salvation was thought out to the smallest detail because God knew the problem of sin was one that the greatest human mind or purest of characters could never find a solution to. And the Old Testament writers were convinced that God’s thoughts were directed towards the people He had created.

Isaiah 55:9

**For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.**

David recognises this too, but it is God’s thoughts about humanity that continue to be a wonder to David.

Psalm 92:5

**5 How great are your works, O LORD! Your thoughts are very deep!**

Psalm 8:3-4

**When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are *mindful* of them, mortals that you *care* for them?**

Psalm 33:11

**The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the *thoughts of his heart* to all generations.**

Psalm 40:5

**You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be *more than can be counted*.**

Psalm 139:17-18

**How *weighty* to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are *more than the sand*;**

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

And those innumerable, seriously considered and caring thoughts manifested themselves in the birth of Christ. Had the Incarnate God not been willing to take on our humanity and experience life in the flesh as we do; and to do even more by suffering and dying the way He did – we would not be celebrating Christmas. Probably the most concise and precise definition of Christmas is the very familiar text **“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”**

*From heaven you came, helpless Babe – entered our world your glory veiled.*

Immanuel – God with us. God the Son who would grow up to be the Saviour of the world. Only the Son of God could succeed in undertaking the work necessary to make reconciliation possible between a Holy God and a sinful humanity.

We can remember too, that the Holy Spirit, starting with the conception of Jesus has continued to play a continuously active role in the world to the present day, and will continue His work until Christ comes again. Had God the Holy Spirit not taken an active role in the conception of Jesus; had He not sustained Him through all His earthly ministry entailed; had He not come at Pentecost to empower the disciples to evangelise the world in accordance with the commission Jesus had given them; had he not continued to convict the world of the need of a Saviour and to convince us of the truth of Scripture about Him – we would not be celebrating Christmas.

Boniface was right to use the illustration of a triangle, for as mentioned, take away any of these three aspects of the Godhead and Christianity is nothing but an empty and futile religion.

Next, we can consider ‘evergreen’. I don’t know what ideas come to mind when you hear the word evergreen. Whatever they may be, I’m pretty sure they are ‘good feeling’ words. I looked it up in a thesaurus, and, under the umbrella of evergreen came, ‘lasting’, ‘perpetual’, ‘new’, ‘young’, ‘unchangeable’. Curiosity took me to ‘perpetual’ and I got ‘everlasting’, ‘godlike’. Those words opened even more doors – ‘timeless’, ‘eternal’, ‘immortal’, ‘permanent’, ‘unceasing’, ‘continuous’. Put any of these in a Biblical context and a winter wonderland of spiritual insight appears – for they all point to God, His Christ and the everlasting hope of the gospel of eternal life, which came as a result of the birth of Christ.

Just exploring a few of the words associated with ‘evergreen’ allows us to see Christmas trees from a different perspective. If ‘evergreen’ is about newness, then we can recognise that God gave us a new revelation of Himself when He sent Christ into the world. If ‘evergreen’ points to something that is timeless, continuous and unceasing, we find that this new revelation has proved to be

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

timeless for it has had a continuous and unceasing existence for over 2000 years. And if 'evergreen' points to unchangeableness then we can recognise that many times people have tried to change the gospel message and rearrange it to suit themselves, but the true gospel is unchangeable for it comes through Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8)

Again, the combination of our two English words 'ever' and 'green' take us to thoughts of what is perpetual, eternal or immortal. These are the primary characteristics of the Godhead and these attributes permeate the whole of Scripture and apply to Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What we believe today as Christians can be found in Scripture from the earliest days of Moses recorded for us in Chronicles, through the Psalms of David to Paul's affirmation in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and John in Revelation, the belief of Christians today, is the fact that

### **1 Chronicles 13:36**

**36 Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting." Then all the people said "Amen!" and praised the LORD.**

### **Psalms 41:13**

**13 Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.**

### **Romans 11:36**

**<sup>36</sup>For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.**

God Himself is the everlasting Alpha and Omega and everything of a spiritual nature connected to God is everlasting too. The rainbow is just one example of the everlasting order God has ordained in the natural world.

### **Genesis 9:16**

**<sup>16</sup>When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." <sup>17</sup>God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."**

In fact, such was the everlasting nature of all that God had ordained in the natural world that Paul, many millennia later was able to assert:

Romans 1:19-20

**For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power**

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

**and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse;**

As people got to know God they learned about the enduring and perpetual love of God for them.

**Psalm 103:17**

**But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children,**

But they also learned that God's holiness would demand from them recognition that righteousness and holy law were the hallmarks of His will for the world, for these would be the characteristics of the everlasting kingdom He was preparing for those who would commit themselves to Him

**Psalm 119:142**

**Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and your law is the truth.**

We saw a few weeks ago that it was Jesus who came to inaugurate that kingdom and to provide the means for people to become citizens of it, though the new covenant in His blood. This too was something God had promised the Old Testament saints.

**Ezekiel 37:26**

**<sup>26</sup>I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. <sup>27</sup>My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.**

This became a reality with the birth of Christ, taking us back to one of the most familiar of our Christmas texts

**Isaiah 9:6-7**

**For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time and forever.**

The evergreen nature of the fir tree opens up a spiritual treasure house of the everlasting nature of what God has ordained for this world. Just taking the 'ever' part of that word can point us in the direction of the eternal Father, Son, Holy Spirit; the eternal attributes of power, deity, name, purpose, reign, dominion and kingdom; the eternal praise of God; eternal dealings with His creation and eternal righteousness, justice and truth of His Being.

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

And the wonderful message of Christmas is that God wants to share that eternal life with us. Christmas reminds us that we have all been given the opportunity to share in all that eternity has to offer. That should not surprise us because God programmed that notion into our very being.

**Ecclesiastes 3:11**

**.....He has also set eternity in the hearts of men.....**

**2 Peter 3:9**

**The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.**

Mention of repentance takes us to other ways in which the contrast between the fir tree's evergreen nature and the condition of nature in winter can illustrate our spiritual situation. In the natural world we are now in last weeks leading to the winter solstice on December 21<sup>st</sup> - which gave rise to the saint's legend. Because of hot houses and the breeding of hardy plants, we don't regard the seeming death of nature as it would have appeared to folk in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. For folk then, as now, greenness in a plant or tree is a sign of life. Spiritually, we can contrast that the Biblical view that we are dead in trespasses and sins. In a sense, the condition of the people of the world is that of nature in winter. Peters words in 1:1:24-25 quoting from Isaiah 40:6-8 give us a Biblical picture of this.

**1 Peter 1:24-25**

**All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fail, but the word of the Lord stands forever.**

Humanity is acutely aware that death is inevitable. From the beginning of time, humanity has tried to find ways to prolong life and to engage in all sorts of rituals to earn eternal life. In a sermon in October, it was said that people look everywhere for a happy life except to the One who can provide it. And, here again, the fir tree can point us in the right direction. The fir tree, shaped like an arrow, or a cathedral spire, directs our attention heavenwards, because the Word that Peter speaks of, in the words of the carol was

**Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.**

Once we are directed to heaven's answer to the quest for eternal life, we come back to the Child of whom it is said

**To whom can we go. You have the words of eternal life.**

Those who have looked heavenwards and accepted Christ as Lord and Saviour, can now consider themselves as 'evergreen' in the spiritual desert around them.

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

That may sound arrogant, but God's word assures us it is true.

### **1 John 5:11-12**

**And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life; this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.**

Accepting the truth of Scripture leads to us becoming, in Paul's words, a 'new creation' in Christ. Peter puts it like this in verse 23

**You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.**

From these verses we can see that the first thing humanity must recognise is that the evergreen foliage of the fir tree comes not from its own effort, but from God. God has done His part in sending Jesus into the world as a baby, to share our humanity and to die to save it. We have a part to play as well, starting with recognition of our sinful nature, our need of salvation, the repentance that leads to our belief in and acceptance of Christ's atonement as our only hope for eternal life. And that, in itself gives us the gift of an eternal hope in the midst of the spiritual darkness of the world for as the carol writer put it -

### **The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight**

Fir trees are part of God's creation too, and we can glorify Him this Christmas just by remembering that their shape speaks to us of Father, Son and Holy Spirit who made Christmas possible. God is glorified in thoughts of the evergreen foliage speaking to us of the everlasting life heralded by Christ coming into the world. As the carol writer expresses it.

Born that man no more may die Born to raise the sons of earth  
Born to give them second birth  
Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the new-born King.

And finally, God is glorified when we look heavenwards to His Christ as our only hope of salvation. To the One who set aside His glory in the heavens to accomplish the means of giving eternal life to a spiritually dead humanity; and who has now returned to those heavens, seated in glory at the right hand of the Father; and is even now preparing a place for us.

### **Ephesians 4:10**

**10He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)**

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

### **2 Corinthians 5:1**

**1 For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.**

### **Isaiah 65:17**

**17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.**

These may not be the traditional Christmas texts you are used to, but if our Christmas trees help to remind us that all of what has been said, then we cannot fault Boniface for encouraging people to bring fir trees into their homes at this time of year, when we can associate them with the celebration of the birth of the One who made it all possible – our Lord Jesus Christ.

# CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

### WEEK 2: CHRISTMAS LIGHTS

The legend of Saint Boniface and fir trees seems to be one that is worth remembering at this time of year. The Trinity, the concept of eternal life and its availability from heaven are all reasons for hope and encouragement in this dark world. But the truth is that if these remain only doctrines or become matters of dogma, then they just join the other worldly philosophies. Something more is needed to bring these things to life and only a Person can do that. Think of the towns and cities around the UK, including Llanelli, which will invite celebrities or V.I.P.s to switch on the Christmas tree lights. It almost seems that is only when the lights are switched on, that the Christmas festive spirit comes to life. Excuse the pun, but I've got to admit that Christmas tree lights are the highlight of Christmas worldly traditions for me. Sitting in a room with just the Christmas tree lights on, gives me a sort of cosy, contented feeling.

In some ways we really can't appreciate what lighting candles on a Christmas tree meant for folk before the advent of electricity. Those lit candles would have brought just a little light into their worlds at the darkest time of the year. We complain about the least interruption of electricity supply and get grumpy if last year's lights don't work, but there are millions of people all around the world today whose only means of light are candles and on a pitch black night, there are many reasons to be fearful. We take not only Christmas tree lights for granted, but also the blessing of electricity, which gives us light through the darkness all year round. So, as we think of those lights, really we should be looking to the One who is the source of all light.

According to Genesis 1:3 the very first words spoken by God were:

**Let there be light and there was light.**

Verses 14-20 speak of the creation of the sun as a light by day and the moon and stars as lights for the night. I once heard the stars described as the holes in the floor of heaven that allow the light of God's heaven to shine through. A fanciful thought, but it nevertheless points to the fact that God sent physical light into the darkness of the formless earth. And it was only the creation of light that made possible the creation of a habitation for all living entities.

**Psalms 36:9 For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.**

It is an undeniable fact that life would be impossible without light. But life in the Bible is not just physical existence. In fact, throughout the Bible light is more often a metaphor for spiritual life, sight and all that has to do with God and goodness. This is opposed by darkness, which, in those contexts, is always associated with death, blindness, Satan and evil.

Isaiah puts this in a very concise way in condemning the wicked and giving us a glimpse of the state of the world.

**Isaiah 5:20 Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!**

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

**Isaiah 59:9** Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.

Matthew gives us Jesus' words which make this contrast up close and personal for every single individual.

Matthew 6:22-23

**The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!**

Given world events in this past year and the incidents of man's inhumanity to man, can we say anything has changed? That's why we need to look at our Christmas lights from a different viewpoint, for they can remind us that physically and spiritually, God is still at work and is still in control even though it appears that evil is sweeping over this world like a tidal wave. For the one fact that the Bible consistently reiterates is that the power of God's light is far superior to the power of darkness.

**Psalms 139:12** even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

The combination of light and darkness and all their associations is a major study, so tonight we will only be following Boniface's third point in looking heavenwards to see what Christmas tree lights can bring to mind.

First and foremost light is one of God's essential attributes.

*Immortal, invisible God only wise; In light inaccessible hid from our eyes*

*.....Thou reignest in glory; thou dwellest in light;*

*thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;*

*all laud we would render: O help us to see*

*'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.*

**1 Timothy 6:16** Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen.

**Psalms 104:1-2** Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent,

**1 John 1:5** This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

The Message

**1 John 1:5** This, in essence, is the message we heard from Christ and are passing on to you: God is light, pure light; there's not a trace of darkness in him.

This is brought home to us by Jesus' transfiguration. Matthew tells us

**Matthew 17:2** And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

And we have Peter's eye witness account of it

2Peter 1:17 The Message

**We were there for the preview! We saw it with our own eyes: 17Jesus resplendent with light from God the Father as the voice of Majestic Glory spoke: "This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of all my delight." 18We were there on the holy mountain with him. We heard the voice out of heaven with our very own ears.**

The Transfiguration of Jesus reminds us that light did not remain the prerogative of divinity. Just as we saw last week how God wanted share His eternal existence to humanity, Christmas lights especially remind us that He has shared this Divine attribute of light with us by sending His Son into the world.

**Isaiah 9:2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.**

John the Baptist's role would be to proclaim Him as the One who would **...shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death."** Luke 1:79

The Apostle John says of John the Baptist 1:7

**7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.**

Simeon recognised Him in **Luke 2:32 as A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.**

John the Apostle testifies John 1:4

**In him was life; and the life was the light of men.**

And Jesus Himself declared in John 8:12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."**

In Jesus and in the lives of His followers we have examples of both the physical and spiritual influence of light. Jesus declared that He had come to "proclaim....recovery of sight to the blind....." Luke 4:18 The miracles included restoring the physical sight of the blind and opening the spiritual eyes of men like Nicodemus. Of Peter's miraculous release from a physical prison we are told in Acts 12:

Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell.

Paul's release from a spiritual prison came on the Damascus Road. The account in Acts 9:3 is recalled by Paul himself in Acts 26:13 – the version in The Message giving the occasion a sense of what must have been its dramatic effect for as he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

**"One day on my way to Damascus, armed as always with papers from the high priests authorizing my action, right in the middle of the day a blaze of light, light outshining the sun, poured out of the sky on me and my companions.**

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

What happened to Paul is a picture of the release from the darkness of both physical and spiritual blindness he had experienced, for the Damascus Road light had left him blind. We are told in Acts 9:17-18

**So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”**

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,

Significantly, it was the receipt of the Holy Spirit that enlightened him spiritually and enabled him to undergo Christian baptism – a sign of willing and knowing understanding of what the ritual meant in Christian terms. It was perhaps this experience that led Paul to later write:

**2 Corinthians 4:3-6 But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.**

Paul had looked into the face of Jesus Christ, and the implication of these words is that he knew that he himself had been blind to the truth of Christ. His physical eyes were opened by a physical touch, but it was the enlightenment of spiritual understanding, brought by the Holy Spirit, that enabled him to become the greatest preacher and teacher of Christianity there has ever been. And it was the Holy Spirit who used Paul to open the eyes not only of people of his day but of countless numbers of Christians over the last 2000 years. Among those was Martin Luther and it is appropriate that we mention him in connection with Christmas tree lights. I don’t know if it is true or not, but Martin Luther is reported to be the first person to put lighted candles on a Christmas tree. The story is that he saw stars shining through the branches of a fir tree outside his window and that gave him the idea of putting a light on the tree he brought into his house at Christmas. We may not be able to verify that story, but there is no doubt that Holy Spirit enlightenment led him to believe and to proclaim to his generation Paul’s assertion that justification comes by faith in Christ’s atonement on the cross and in no other way. That was a spiritual light that blazed through Europe and is the foundation of Christianity for millions throughout the world today.

The Spirit of wisdom and revelation, which had enlightened Paul and brought about a Reformation through Martin Luther, proved the ancient words of the Psalmist that God’s word is a light and a lamp.

**The Message Psalm 119:105 A light to my feet – a lamp to my path**

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

**By your words I can see where I'm going; they throw a beam of light on my dark path.**

Martin Luther and indeed all who believe, trust in and obey God's Word are an answer to Paul's prayer found in Ephesians 1:17-18

**I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, 18so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,**

God's primary means of revealing all aspects of Himself are to be found only in the Scriptures He has provided. And again we can relate this to Christmas lights. This is the time when we celebrate the Word becoming flesh and giving us the practical example of being a light in a dark world. For we are not to keep this light to ourselves.

Jesus has commanded Matthew 5:14

**14Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. 15Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. 16Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.**

Paul told the Thessalonians in 1Thessalonians 5:5

**Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness.**

The Message **You're sons of Light, daughters of Day. We live under wide open skies and know where we stand.**

**1 John 1:7 but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.**

As sons and daughters of light we are to adopt a lifestyle that reflects that light. Many people reject Christianity today because they see it as an judgemental, oppressive and joyless way of life. But in Hebrew thought, God as light with all its divine qualities and associations was a source of joy and celebration.

Esther 8:16 sums it up for us.

**For the Jews there was light and gladness, joy and honour.**

That God had delivered the Jews from certain genocide was justifiably a very happy occasion for which thanks was given God. But God is not mentioned by name in the book of Esther. Yet the mention of the presence of light in this verse would have conveyed to its readers and hearers, God's role in that deliverance. The gladness, joy and honour were the consequences of God's intervention in that situation. In the rest of Scripture the Divine light is associated with everything that makes a humanity glad, fills it with joy, always it rests on an honourable basis because it cannot be anything else but good.

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

And like the saints of old we can agree with the Psalmist who observed Psalm **89:15 Happy are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O LORD, in the light of your countenance;**

But, unlike the saints of old, we can base our 'festal shout' on the foundation of the light that entered our world giving us a reason to celebrate Christmas with a joy and gladness that surpasses anything the world can offer. We can do that because of the inheritance that becomes ours when we accept the Christ-child as our Saviour.

**Colossians 1:12-14 giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.**

As Christians we are already citizens of that kingdom of light. Yes, we do have to go through valleys of darkness, despair and death. When all the Christmas tree lights are put away for another year, some of the physical darkness of the time of year returns and we know that in the coming year we all may face times of darkness in our lives. It's part of our natures and traditions to expect (and hope) that the Christmas lights will reappear and be useable next year. It's also our hope that as another New Year dawns that there will be more light than darkness in our lives. But whether or not God calls a halt to life on earth in the foreseeable future or regardless of whatever He allows to enter our lives in that time, we know can still look forward to a time when the lights will never go out again and no kind of darkness can even touch us again.

We have been given a promise of a light filled existence spelled out for us in, among other places, Isaiah and Revelation

**Isaiah 60:19-20 The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory; Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.**

**Revelation 21:23 And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.**

**Revelation 21:11 The Message Holy Jerusalem descending out of Heaven from God, 11resplendent in the bright glory of God.**

**The City shimmered like a precious gem, light-filled, pulsing light.**

**Isaiah 51:11 again associates this with the everlasting joy and gladness of the ransomed of the Lord**

**And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.**

I said last week's talk that if Christians don't celebrate the true meaning of Christmas, then we can't complain if other worldly interests hi-jack it from us.

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

The Church does its part by emphasising it is about the birth of Christ and all that means for the salvation of the world. The Church reminds us of the relevant Scriptures and the truths to be found in our Christmas carols and songs. But individually we can do that just by sparing a thought for what God's Word says about light in our ordinary, domestic Christmas preparations. People sometimes have said that they wished the Christmas spirit of peace and goodwill would last all year. Christians can actually do that by taking these thoughts about Christmas lights, and by living in the light of them, become a light to those we come into contact with.

Eugene Petersen in the Message version of the Bible gives us Jesus' words like this.

**“Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. .... Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.**

By being the light of the world that Jesus wants us to be, God can use us to bring this Christmas message to others all year round

**Matthew 4:16**

**the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”**

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

### WEEK 3: CHRISTMAS SYMBOLS AND SONGS

What, for you, is the burning question for anyone responsible for the Christmas tree? Will I or won't I have one this year? Big or small? Real or artificial? Colour co-ordination? Will last year's lights work? When will I get the time to do it? Most of us I suppose follow the same routine as far as Christmas trees are concerned, unless the real big decision is to have a real change this year. And routine is often why we don't consider another question – what should we put on top of the Christmas tree? The choice is traditionally between an angel and a star. Both are traditional, but I've got to admit I prefer an angel to a star. Maybe it's because angels usually look a lot nicer than stars. But when you consider what both can symbolise for Christians, it seems that it is very appropriate that they should be considered the best decoration to be put at the top of the tree.

Let's take stars first. Throughout the ages humanity has been fascinated by the heavenly lights to the extent that in the last century a way was found to reach the moon and orbit the planets. Astronomy is a major field of scientific research and a pleasurable hobby for many folks. And, of course, we can't omit the example of people living their lives and trying to predict their future by consulting their stars. Watch the New Year magazines and newspapers and see how the forecasts for the year ahead is given for each star sign.

We talk about stars in many contexts today –we see stars when we have had a nasty bump on our heads; stars of the silver screen, TV and radio; 'you're a star' expression when someone has done something praiseworthy etc. Literally, our view of stars can range from the sublime to the ridiculous. But we have to remember that, although Christians have a very derogatory view of reading horoscopes by star signs, to the ancient world the movement of stars was as serious and significant as scientific study of them are today. And, no matter what way you look at it, to see real stars, your gaze is automatically taken heavenwards. Stars are mentioned 70 times in the Bible and each one of them would have conveyed a special meaning to all who originally read or heard these texts. And they do the same for us today. I mentioned last week that stars were included in God's first act of creation. Genesis 1:16. Go on a little further to Genesis chapters 15:5 and 22:17 and we see stars as the symbol of the people of God who will come to Him by faith.

**He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars –if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."**

**I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.**

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

Then to Genesis 37:9 where stars play a significant part in Joseph's prophetic dream.

**Then he had another dream and he told it to his brothers. "Listen....I had another dream and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.**

This was the final straw for the brothers and led to Joseph being sold as a slave into Egypt which, in turn, set the scene for Moses and the Exodus. By that time, stars were such a common feature of pagan worship that God had to explicitly forbid worship of them for the Israelites. –Deuteronomy 4:19.

**And when you look up to the sky and see the sun and the moon and the stars – all the heavenly array – do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshipping [them].....**

In Nehemiah 4:21, we find the stars being used in a practical sense.

**So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out.**

Nehemiah used the stars to determine when the day's labour to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem would end and protection would no longer be needed for the workers. And I don't think I need to repeat the instances in the writing prophets, other parts of the New Testament, especially Revelation, where the mention of the stars ceasing to shine or falling out of the sky became signs of God's judgement and/or of the end of the world. At Christmas, we naturally turn to the star that led the Magi from the East to worship the Jesus. The Magi were members of a priestly caste in ancient Persia. They are described in some Bible versions as 'Wise men'. This and the fact that the Bible offers no criticism of their 'star-gazing', suggests that this was a legitimate activity for them. Also, in the ancient world, wisdom was associated with age. So, the story implies that these were serious minded men who had encountered something they had never seen before: something that was so outside their experience that they had to investigate it further. Now some may say that if these men can be remembered for being guided by a star, what's so wrong about seeking guidance from the stars? The Christian answer is that the Wise Men were guided by one star. A star which anyone in the ancient world would have regarded as spectacular – like the phenomena that only appear in our skies once in a hundred years or more. It would have conveyed the meaning that something stupendous had happened in the world, hence the need for further investigation. Today, we know exactly what stupendous thing had happened.

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

God had entered our world as a helpless baby, born in an outhouse in a little backwoods town called Bethlehem. And that star symbol still lies with Him. As far back in the Old Testament as Numbers 24:17, there is a startling source for that. Balaam prophesied

**I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A STAR will come out of Jacob, a SCEPTRE will rise out of Israel.**

While it is true that the prophecy must first be read in its immediate context, there is no doubt that this can be regarded as Messianic, for it is directly related to Jacob's blessing of his son Judah. That is the origin of the Lion of Judah mentioned in Revelation and the reference to the sceptre never departing from Judah

**Genesis 49:9-10**

**You are a LION CUB, O JUDAH....the SCEPTRE will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet**

Fast forward to Revelation 5:5

**Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See the LION OF THE TRIBE OF JUDAH, the Root of David has TRIUMPHED....."**

And then to Revelation's 22:16 where Jesus Himself says

**I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright MORNING STAR.**

Especially in Rome, this reference to 'morning star' would have rung alarm bells. To us, it's a nice image: then it was a political time bomb. The morning star is Venus, whom the Romans worshipped as the goddess of sovereignty and victory. Roman armies had her sign inscribed on their standards. But the designation Morning Star from the lips of Jesus takes us back to the fact that the Baby born in Bethlehem, whose birth was heralded to the Gentile world by a star, will one day be hailed as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. That title will be the result of victory over all the forces of evil, and sovereignty over the eternal cosmos which He will bring into being at the end of time. That is the day Christians can look forward to with confidence and longing for as one song says

**Man will live forever more, because of Christmas day.**

Again stars can point us to this truth for in Philippians 2:14-16 says of Jesus followers

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

**Do everything without complaining or arguing so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.....**

A lot more could be said about stars in the Bible and it almost convinced me to change from an angel to a star this year – but I stuck with an angel – mainly because I think I have a nice one, and on a closer look at it this year, the gown is sprinkled with stars so I've got the best of both. But what is special about Christmas angels?

Well David went back to angels on Sunday and they have been mentioned in Bible studies and Christmas talks in the past, so what more is there to be said about them. Well, before we've concentrated on what angels are and what they do for God and for us. One of their key functions in the Bible is as messengers. Especially at Christmas, we remember the angel's visit to Mary announcing that she would have a Child who would be Saviour of the world. We have the angel's message to Zechariah foretelling that he would have a son who would be a great prophet foretelling the coming of the long awaited Messiah. But what we often take for granted because the text is so familiar, is the angels' message to the shepherds. There were actually two messages. A single angel told them

### **Luke2:10-12**

**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 cloths and lying in a manger.**

The demeanour of the shepherds when the angel appeared was one of terror. Can you honestly say you wouldn't be just a little bit afraid or at least very apprehensive if an angel suddenly appeared to you in the middle of the night in a dark bedroom? Given what we said last week about the Hebrew mind's perception of darkness with all that was anti-God and evil, we can have some appreciation of the terror they must have felt. In fact, the angel recognised this with first words spoken – **“Do not be afraid.”** The first thing that the Christmas message removed was fear. Fear is a primal human instinct. The first thing children seem to fear is the dark. For the shepherds this was fear of the unknown, fear of what supernatural phenomena might entail. In many ways, these same fears haunt the world today because these are aspects of what the world fears most - death. But the coming of Christ into the world instead replaced that fear with joy. The angel's message could be received with joy

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

because the Saviour would inaugurate the means to free people from the fear of the darkness of sin and of death. We mentioned last week that light was associated with joy and gladness and this message of “good news of great joy” was accompanied by the very light of heaven for the glory of the Lord shone around them.

A heavenly light had entered the world, which was a matter for great celebration and worship for we are told that the single angel was joined by “a great company of the heavenly host.” singing praises to God. When you think of it, Christmas is a time for seasonal songs. No matter where you go you will hear Christmas songs and there will be that rivalry to be the ‘Christmas number 1’. I watched a programme during the summer about the 10 richest songs of all time – songs that had made the most money for their composers. Three of those songs were Christmas ones. White Christmas is obvious – number 2, written in 1940 (36m dollars); then at 7 came ‘Santa Claus is coming to Town’, written in 1934 (25m dollars); and at number 10, The Christmas Song (Chestnuts roasting on an open fire etc.) written in 1944 (19m dollars). Christmas songs are part of our traditions, but for Christians what we need to keep alive are the songs that give sense to the real meaning of Christmas. Some secular songs do acknowledge this, but the major remembrance of them takes place in Church, carol services and special Christmas choir presentations. Those music ministries really do have a major role in the celebration of the birth of Christ.

And the angels’ song takes us to the very heart of the meaning of Christmas, which is echoed in so many of our well-known carols and a lot of newer songs as well. The angel’s praise is for a very specific and very significant purpose. Fear could be replaced by joy because God had made a peace treaty with humanity in sending Christ into the world. Maybe it’s not exactly how we should be viewing this message, but that in effect was what it was.

### **Luke 2:14**

**Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.**

Again just a few words but so significant and so profound. Glory to God in the highest takes us back to all we have looked at in past studies about the heavenly throne of the One who is the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the end. It takes us back to the innumerable heavenly inhabitants praising the God to whom all glory, honour, majesty and praise is to be made. Why? Because only God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is responsible for the salvation of the world – the salvation only made possible by the coming of a Saviour who would die on a cross to atone for the sins of the world and enable

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

the reconciliation of sinful humanity to a Holy God. It may not be a Christmas song, but the Christmas message of the angels is summed up in the words

**To God be the glory great things He hath done  
So loved He the world that He gave us His Son  
Who yielded His life an atonement for sin  
And opened the life gates that all may go in.**

Glory was and is due to God alone, for only God could have accomplished the impossible task of enabling a sin-ridden humanity to be made into the righteousness of Christ by faith in the One born at Christmas and who died on a cross for that purpose.

Four hundred years of God's silence in disgust with what His chosen people had become was broken when this message was first broadcast to the shepherds, who heralded it to the world. Unilaterally, God had decided He wanted to make a peace treaty with the people who had rebelled against Him and rejected all He stood for. The heavenly host proclaimed that God was sending His peace to the earth and it would remain, not just for a time, but for all eternity if people accepted His terms. They would enter His favour and He would be the guarantor of their peace and because of it, the source of their joy of the hope of eternal life.

However, we do need to be very careful about our interpretation of what comes after that initial praise. Hark, the herald angels sing puts the words in their proper context.

**Peace on earth and mercy mild; God and sinners reconciled.**

Peace is something the world has seen too little of in this past year. In fact the unmerciful actions of jihadists possibly has made us all realise the horrific consequences of the absence of compassion and mercy which shows love for our neighbours; and the depths a human being can sink to when this command is ignored. Look at a man who can rejoice in being able to publicly behead another human being simply for not agreeing with his view of how life should be lived, and we face the consequences of sin in one of its starkest forms. Yet, while it is right to pray for an end to these actions and the ideology behind it, too often we think of praying for peace only in the sense of an absence of conflict. I can tell you from an example nearer home, that while there is an apparent absence of conflict in Northern Ireland, there is no real peace there. That is because true reconciliation between the two communities has not materialised. Suspicion, rivalry and often hatred are still rampant. So when we read what the angels say about peace on earth – there is a caveat. Peace is for

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

those upon whom God's favour rests. It is the kind of peace that can only be achieved through the genuine reconciliation between two opposing forces. Absence of conflict is the by-product of reconciliation, for if true reconciliation does not take place, conflict simply assumes other forms, with the potential for more serious forms, more often than not, a probability in the future. There can be no real peace on earth until humanity is reconciled to God and that can only be achieved through the One the prophets called 'the Prince of Peace' – the Lord Jesus Christ. Only then will people be prepared and willing to be reconciled fully with their fellow human beings.

I'm reminded of the song 'I heard the bells on Christmas day. The second verse says:

**Then in despair I bowed my head  
There is no peace on earth I said  
For hate is strong and mocks the song  
Of peace on earth goodwill to men.**

But it goes on

**Then hear the bells more loud and deep  
God is not dead, nor does He sleep  
The wrong will fail, the right prevail  
With peace on earth goodwill to men.**

That wrong will fail and right will prevail seems like an impossible dream in the world as we know it, but one day all wrongs will be righted. Christmas reminds us that during that 400 years of silence, 'God was not dead nor did He sleep'. Instead, he was preparing the world for the arrival of the One who could achieve genuine peace on earth by being the Mediator between God and humanity and who would make true and eternal reconciliation possible.

This is what the heavenly host was celebrating. They were proclaiming the birth of the Saviour who could achieve the humanly impossible – a guaranteed, divinely ordained peace that would last for all eternity. A peace that, according to Paul, passes all human understanding of it. Long before Paul, Isaiah recognised that true peace was to be found only through God.

**Isaiah 26:3**

**You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast because he trusts in you.**

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---

Today, God's favour rests on the one who trusts in all He has said and promised in His Word. His promises are worthy of our trust because we believe in a God who was willing to set aside His glory, to be born into this world as a vulnerable human baby, and take on the human personality and mission of Jesus with all that that entailed. Great celebrations accompany outstanding national and international events. But no earthly event can compare with the birth of Jesus. Whether we realise it or not, a new world order came into being. A world order that would proclaim a gospel replacing worldly despair with divinely inspired hope; would preach love for all people instead of hatred and intolerance; would replace the fear of death with the certainty of eternal life, for those who would accept the Person who embodied that gospel message.

I know that Christmas is often a time of sadness and emptiness for many people and the media and commercial 'party season' hype only heightens that despair or sorrow or loss. For Christians too, sometimes it is simply not appropriate to express joy and exuberance outwardly and expect others to reciprocate in kind. But in our hearts and in our spirits, we can still appreciate that trees, lights, stars, angels and songs, all have special significance at Christmas. They are part of our traditional acknowledgement that the birth of the Saviour is worthy of celebration. Perhaps, these talks can help us to see the real significance of Christmas when we see and hear them around us, for in doing so, we can still experience the inward joy and rejoicing that sings with the angels

**Sing choirs of angels  
Sing in exultation  
Sing all ye citizens of heaven above  
Glory to God in the highest  
O Come let us adore Him – Christ the Lord**

And I hope Alan doesn't mind me finishing with what he said a couple of weeks ago. If celebrating the birth of Christ was good enough for the heavenly host, then that's good enough for me.

**Joyful, all you nations rise, join the triumph of the skies;  
With the angelic host proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem  
Hark the herald angels sing  
Glory to the new born King.**

# CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

---