

PONDER ANEW....

WEEK 1: THE SIGN

It crossed my mind that the beginning of November was a bit early to start Advent talks - but then, if ASDA in Manchester could employ a real live Santa to promote their Christmas gift cards on 24th July and Selfridges can open their Christmas shop the first week in August, our preparations actually seem to be coming rather late in the day.

And the more I thought about the timing the more I came to the conclusion that, in fact, this is probably a better time to start thinking about the birth of Jesus. That is because, if you're anything like me, you find there are so many other things going on in December and your mind in on whatever preparations have to be done for Christmas whether you are at home or travelling. The words, 'What is this life if so full of care we have no time to stand and stare', might sum up our Church and personal December programmes.

Also, and I think this probably applies more to those of us who have had years listening to the Christmas story, singing the familiar carols and seeing various nativity plays. These things are so familiar to us that we don't really HAVE to think about them. We are content to have our memories refreshed and be able to give ourselves a pat on the back for we Christians know the real meaning of Christmas. But do we ever question that. Have we ever gone beyond the obvious meaning of the birth of Jesus?

Think about it. We may think we are starting the Advent talks early, but God made an even earlier start in preparing for Christmas - literally, before the foundation of the world. And from the time He chose the Israelites to be His witnesses to the world, He began to reveal His plans. So, now that we've got the time, let's think a bit more about the real meaning of Christmas and as the old hymn puts it "Ponder anew what the Almighty can do, who with His love doth befriend thee." The first thing that the hymn tells us is that Christmas is a work of God. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his commentary on Ephesians states categorically.

"The Bible is God's book, it is a revelation of God, and our thinking must always start with God."

In concentrating on Jesus birth, God's planning and role in bringing about this event is seen sometimes as of secondary importance. Yet, as one line in a carol puts it signs were part of that momentous event. - "Love was born at Christmas, star and angels gave the sign. And, in particular, the angel's song recognised that this event was a work of God in their first words - "Glory to God in the highest".

Have you ever thought about how our lives are governed by signs? But, like many of the signs we see about us today, they are often taken for granted or ignored or missed altogether. That was brought home to me the Sunday I had to visit Sinead in hospital at Glangwili. Between the afternoon and evening visiting times, I drove into Carmarthen to look for somewhere to get something to eat. I got completely lost and found myself driving the wrong way up a one way street - much to the annoyance of oncoming drivers. Well, I never could reverse in a straight line, so you can imagine it was quite a nerve wrecking experience, not to mention a potential car wrecking one having to do so. Missing that sign could have led to a real disaster and even loss of life. But missing and/or ignoring God's signs endangers our immortal souls and can lead to eternal disaster.

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The carol tells us that the star and the angels were signs from God, but God's use of signs to reveal something of great importance started long before the birth of Jesus.

Right from the rainbow in Genesis, through the sign of circumcision given to Abraham, the plagues of Egypt, the cloud and pillar of fire and the Sabbath law, to the signs given to the kings of Israel and Judah through the prophets, God continually made known both His pleasure and displeasure with His people. At Christmas, however, one sign in particular is of immense importance - the one found in the very familiar Christmas text - Isaiah 7:14

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

This is a crucial step in our understanding of the real meaning of Christmas. With the benefit of hindsight, we accept these as 'Messianic prophecies', but that does not mean that Isaiah knew that what the Lord said to him referred to Jesus of Nazareth. What Isaiah was very aware of was that his nation was being threatened by the Assyrians. Verse 7:14 is actually addressed to King Ahaz who was allying with the Assyrians to defeat the kings of Damascus and Samaria. While it is true that Isaiah may have interpreted the sign God told him about differently to us, the commentator J.N. Oswalt puts it in a proper context for us.

“But no child born to a young woman in Ahaz's day is proof of God's presence in all times. But if a virgin overshadowed by God's Spirit should conceive and give birth, it would not only be a sign of God's presence with us. Better than that, it would be the reality of that experience. So Ahaz's sign must be rooted in its own time to have significance for that time, but it also must extend beyond that time and into a much more universal mode if its radical truth is to be any more than a vain hope.

In other words, this sign was a matter of forth-telling for the time in which Isaiah was told by God to say it. But it was also a fore-telling of a future event that would be nothing short of a miracle. Do we really believe that? Even among Christian clergy, doubts about this are being expressed. The virgin birth is now one tenet of our faith that is coming under increasing pressure to be abandoned in liberal Christianity. This is justified by pointing to the word Isaiah uses for 'virgin' which could mean any unmarried girl whether sexually experienced or not. But Matthew, a Jew, writing to a Jewish audience, makes the meaning quite clear by Mary and Joseph's experiences.

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Luke 1:34

But after he had considered this (divorcing Mary) an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Matthew 1:20

The record of Mary herself, confirming her virginity and the angel's assurances to Joseph that Mary's pregnancy was a supernatural act of God, brings us face-to-face with the very foundations of Christianity. The virgin birth was the beginning of the final stage of God's plan of salvation. That's why we need to 'ponder it anew'.

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The virgin would be with child. We forget that in that time this would have been considered a miracle and, perhaps we don't think about the fact that in Jewish thinking, this is not the way a Messiah would enter the world. Isaiah was prophesying a unique, never-to-be-repeated event. This was to be a birth that would change the history of the world. What God was going to do was not only of temporal worldly significance: it extended into the realms of the ultimate eternity for humanity. And God had planned the exact moment in time this would happen.

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son.....

Galatians 4:4

Not only had He planned the exact moment in time, He had already chosen the girl who would give birth to Jesus. How do we know that? Well Isaiah says 'the' virgin, not 'a' virgin. I don't know how they teach English these days, but I was taught that 'the' was the definite article and referred to a particular person, place or thing. Isaiah's words thus indicate that Mary was already in God's mind when He planned Jesus' coming into the world. We can assert this because other Scriptures tell us that:

Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be

Psalm 139

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah 1:5

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will

Ephesians 1:11

The omniscience, the all knowing attribute of God applies to everything that happens in this world, past, present and future. The One who knows when a sparrow falls, is the same One who knows the details of every individual's life. But the amazing thing is that this is not knowledge for the sake of knowledge, it is the knowledge that ensures that every detail of a person's life goes according to God's ultimate plan for their lives and for His glory.

And Mary had a very special part to play in those plans. If we are honest, our primary view of Mary is whatever little girl is chosen to play Mary in the nativity play. This nativity image keeps us from having to think too deeply or seriously about this young girl. A probable reason for this is the Protestant rejection of the Roman Catholic view of Mary. This doctrine states that after conception, while Mary was in the womb, she was 'cleansed' of sin by the Holy Spirit and was therefore born sinless, i.e immaculate. This, however, goes against the Biblical doctrine that "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." There is none righteous, no not one." The Roman Catholic doctrine goes further in maintaining that Mary remained a virgin throughout her entire life.

Protestants have rejected this doctrine and insist that while Mary was a virgin in the accepted sense of that description, after Jesus' birth she became both a wife to Joseph and a mother to Jesus' siblings. Mary is respected in Protestant thinking, but is not regarded as particularly important in the overall pattern of Jesus' life and work. But one very important Biblical text is missed in not pondering the virgin birth.

And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed (offspring); it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

Genesis 3:15

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This is the only place in the Bible that mentions “her” seed, her “offspring”. In all other occurrences of this word, it always refers to a male. Think about all the implications of this. Why, if Eve was the first to disobey God by eating the forbidden fruit, was her gender to be the means by which the Messiah would enter the world? The answer clearly taught is that Eve was deceived by the most subtle creature which had never before been encountered and therefore she had no knowledge or warning that temptation could exist in Paradise. Adam on the other hand, had been given a direct order from God and chose to disobey it. Hence that is the reason the Bible insists Adam’s disobedience brought humanity into condemnation for sin.

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned — Romans 5:12

It was not that Eve did not sin. It was the fact that her sin was not deliberate disobedience, but the result of the subtlety of a powerful adversary who, today, is still deceiving Christians in so many ways, sometimes even appearing as an angel of light. None of us is immune from those attacks and none of us can claim that we will never succumb to his “wiles.”

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. John 8:44

And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness 2 Corinthians 11:14

Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil Ephesians 6:11

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 1 Peter 5:8

And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceives the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him Revelation 12:9

Adam was not deceived. He had the opportunity to refuse to eat the fruit. He didn’t and because of the taint of sin which he would pass to all future generations, it became impossible for a human male to have any part in the coming of the Messiah into the world.

From this ‘pondering’ we can trace God’s planning for Christmas right from before the world began, when He knew what would happen in Eden and planned accordingly. Those words in Eden about ‘her seed’ was first instance of the revelations He would give through various people, events and circumstances as history progressed through Old Testament times. But Mary was the fulfilment of the prophetic revelation that began in the Garden of Eden.

For us today, the supernatural nature of Jesus’ conception reaches its climax in the teaching of the New Testament. According to both John and Paul, the divine power exercised in the conception of Jesus is the same power that enables our spiritual ‘new birth’. Jesus was the firstborn, the first fruits of those who would become the spiritual children of God.

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Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. John 1:12-13

Paul in Romans 8:29 reminds us:

For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. 1 Corinthians 15:22

It is with the benefit of hindsight and from a Christian perspective, we can see that, in one sense, Isaiah's prophecy is but another reminder of what God had already planned and was in the process of implementing. It is because the prophecy was fulfilled in the circumstances of Jesus' birth that we see Isaiah's words in such a clear light. It may have taken another 725 years or so to bring about. But throughout the Old Testament there are other prophecies about Jesus' birth that build up a picture of what we now celebrate as Christmas.

And it is only by looking back to the very beginning of human existence that we can understand why a non-negotiable article of our faith is belief in a virgin birth. Only by miraculous divine means was it possible for a sinless human being to be born into the world given Adam's hereditary nature. If we do not believe that about Jesus' conception then all that we have been told in the New Testament about the meaning and significance of His life, death, resurrection and ascension becomes suspect. Our own 'new birth' is completely dependent on Jesus being "conceived by the Holy Spirit."

And that brings us to the second implication of Isaiah's sign which points us to the Holy Spirit - - the name Immanuel, meaning God with us. That is also something Christians take very much for granted, because in many ways we do not realise how privileged we are. The virgin birth of the child to be named Immanuel has stupendous and profound significance for us. It is only by thinking about how limited the concept of 'Immanuel' was in the Old Testament, that we can start to appreciate just how lavish God now is with His Presence, all because 'The virgin would be with child.' I remember Stuart asking about the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament and it is true that the Spirit did signify God's presence with particular people. But speaking overall, the Spirit only came upon certain people, for a certain time, in a specific place and for a specific purpose. The Spirit was not given to all of God's people as a continuous affirmation of His Presence with them. John the Baptist is the first person in the Bible who was given the Holy Spirit at birth and He remained with him for the whole of his life. In the Old Testament the Presence of God was first revealed in Exodus 40:34 when the tabernacle was constructed.

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

Later the Presence of God was believed to dwell in Solomon's temple.

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When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple.
1 Kings 8:9

Apart from temporary presence through the Spirit with certain individuals, 'God with us' in the Old Testament was a corporate Presence in the temple for the whole nation of Israel. But probably one of the most depressing accounts in the Old Testament is that of Ezekiel 10 which describes the departure of God from the temple which was about to be destroyed by the Babylonians.

Then the glory of the Lord went up from the cherub, and stood over the threshold of the house; and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the Lord 's glory.
Ezekiel 10:4

Then the glory of the Lord departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim. While I watched, the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground, and as they went, the wheels went with them. They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the Lord 's house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them
Ezekiel 10:18

And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city, and stood upon the mountain which is on the east side of the city.
Ezekiel 11:22

By chapter 43 Ezekiel is describing the returning glorious Presence of God to the temple - but it is the eternal temple in the new heaven and earth, not an earthly one. Indeed, one of the things completely neglected after the return from exile was the rebuilding of the temple, and we are not told of God's presence in it because, as Malachi and other post-exilic prophets tell us, the returning exiles had returned not just to the land, but to their old evil ways. But it is in Malachi too that the promise of the Lord's return to His temple will come again.

“Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,” says the Lord Almighty, “and I will accept no offering from your hands
Malachi 1:9

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty.
Malachi 2:17

The Jews were expecting God's presence to come to the building in Jerusalem. But 'God with us' would not come in the way the people expected. "God with us" first came in the form of a human Baby. A Baby that grew through childhood and manhood and for 33 years interacted with God's chosen people. We don't need to be reminded of their rejection of Him, but as believers, we know that His Atonement for sin and His resurrection from the dead and ascension enabled His Presence - the Holy Spirit - to be with every Christian because the body of the Christian has become the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God
1 Corinthians 6:19

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“Immanuel” was no longer to be a corporate Presence for a chosen nation represented by the Holy of Holies in an earthly building. Neither was ‘Immanuel’ to be limited to special individuals on a temporary basis for a special assignment. ‘Immanuel’ was to be the gift of the Holy Spirit on a permanent basis to every individual who believed that the child born of the virgin was the Saviour of the world. These are just some of the verses that tell us it was a gift that was given lavishly and generously, being ‘poured out’ indicating an unlimited measure.

“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.
Acts 2:17-18

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God
Acts 10:45

And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us
Romans 5:5

He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.
Titus 3:4

Two other texts also give us the extent of this ‘pouring out’. The Acts account expresses some astonishment that the Holy Spirit was ‘poured out’ on Gentiles. I wonder what the disciples would make of the fact that 2000 years later He has been given to everyone who believed, Revelation showing this included every nation, tribe, people and language. In other words, a world-wide phenomenon.

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.
Ephesians 1:12

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”
Revelation 7:9-10

These are only some of the threads of significance that can be followed from the sign given to Isaiah. Without an uncompromising belief in the virgin birth of Christ, we have no basis for believing that the sinless Son of God died on Calvary. And if Jesus was not sinless in every sense of the Scriptural meaning and nuance of that word, then there has been no atonement for the sin of humanity initiated by Adam. And without that atonement, it would have been impossible for anyone to claim God is with us, in the Scriptural sense of the name ‘Immanuel’.

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As we hear the Christmas story again which perhaps might include Matthew 1:20, hopefully we will realise just how far-reaching these few simple words of prophecy were and how truly miraculous God's signs are, for within each are words of promises that can never fail.

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us")

... God has said, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you."

Hebrews 13:5

...; Jesus said:
Matthew 28:20

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

WEEK 2: THE GIFT

By this time, the whole idea of Christmas presents has either started or is about to start looming large in our thoughts about Christmas - unless you're a last minute shopper and are brave enough to try and find yourself a parking space to go to do it. One thing that cured me of any kind of shopping in the last few days before Christmas was the experience of self-congratulations on finding a space, only to have it turned into the fuse blowing experience of spending over half an hour trying to get out of it because of traffic. And just a thought in passing about presents - why do we talk more about Christmas presents rather than call them Christmas gifts? That came to mind simply because I would have found it rather awkward to talk about Jesus being a Christmas present. On the other hand, if we take another familiar text - **For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given** - the thought of Jesus being a divine gift seems quite appropriate because there is no doubt from Isaiah's words that he believed the birth he foretold was a gift from God. We can say this because every child was regarded as a gift from God in Jewish thought, but especially welcome was the birth of a son because he could potentially be the Messiah. This is the thinking behind the very familiar Christmas song "When a child is born." (cannot be included because of copyright). That song expresses the hope that one day a child will be born who will grow up to set the world to rights. Compare its words to Isaiah 9:6-7.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness 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 on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this

In some ways you could say that the song is an echo of what is expressed by Isaiah, especially as the one thing both song and text have in common, is that a male child will be the means of bringing about this utopian life. Both are in agreement that the birth of the child will herald a new world order. The major difference is that the song does not reflect the fact that that child has already been born. It's only a dream, an illusion, but one that there is a yearning to become reality. Christmas is the time when we believe that yearning for a Messiah came true. Christmas is the time when God planned to directly intervene in human affairs by bringing about the birth of a very special child - a child who would change the world, albeit not in the way the song or Jewish hopes focused on.

Going back to what Martyn Lloyd Jones said about everything starting with God we see the confirmation that everything did start with God for it was the '**zeal of the Lord Almighty**' which

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would accomplish what was to take place. We can also see that the words God gave to Isaiah were words, not about dreams or illusions, but certain promises that would one day be fulfilled and go beyond the human plane and into eternity. We caught a glimpse of that by ‘pondering’ the implication of the the sign that ‘The virgin will be with child’ and that He would be called ‘Immanuel.’ The significance of those took us back to God who planned Jesus’ miraculous birth before the foundation of the world, indicated in what can be termed the first Messianic prophecy in the Bible in Genesis 3:15 that in terms of parentage only the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary would be involved; and with further revelations given in various ways throughout the history of God’s chosen people, including these very significant descriptions in Isaiah, we already have sufficient information to believe that since this Child is born, humanity faces a radical choice in terms of their beliefs and lifestyles.

So, having already mentioned the miraculous conception of the Child, after an interval, Isaiah now foretells the birth. And it is the way he phrases it that gives us reason to ponder it anew. Why didn’t Isaiah just say ‘Unto us a male child is born or given?’ Scholars have seen a tendency in Jewish writing to say the same thing twice, just with a slight change of wording. And if Isaiah expressed God’s words in this way then there must have been a reason for mentioning both a child being born and a Son being given. That becomes even more apparent as we move to what Isaiah says about the Child Himself. He first gives us a statement of fact. “For unto us a child is born.” ‘For’ is an indication that the Child has been born for a specific reason and purpose. Again between chapter 7 and 9 Isaiah is speaking of the importance of this for his own time when the people of both Israel and Judah were facing devastating conquests by Assyria and Babylon. Perhaps it might have seemed strange even in Isaiah’s day that the birth of a child would be able to influence national events and the future fate of God’s people. Sad to say this prophecy in the world at large is not even regarded as strange anymore - instead it is treated with unbelief and contempt. With the denial of the virgin birth, Jesus’ arrival in the world is just another baby being born. But the church down through the ages has realised the tremendous implications in Isaiah’s statements, for this Child would be the means of a permanent and eternal redemption and restoration of sinful humanity. And it is only when we start to ponder the implications of what Isaiah says that a Christian celebration of Christmas should be a major highlight in the Church calendar.

I mentioned in the last talks that Jesus was the only human being who had a choice of whether or not to be born. While Jesus’ conception was miraculous, His actual birth was natural. He was a baby born in the normal way. God Incarnate coming into the world as a baby - taking upon Himself all the vulnerability and dependency that that entailed. Very often we use Paul’s words in Philippians 2 to illustrate Jesus’ humility even when it meant dying on a cross. But to leave the glory of heaven and all the divine attributes of being almighty, all knowing and able to be present everywhere to become a human baby - well, you be the judge of the breadth and depth of humility that took. Even our greatest estimates would fall far short because we have no concept of the ultimate and complete glory of God’s presence in heaven.

And it is not just the manner of His birth, but also the environment He was born into. Born to poor parents in an outhouse and His first visitors were shepherds, one of the least regarded of the occupational groups in Palestine. To all intents and purposes, the angelic message to the shepherds indicated only that the child who would grow up to be the Messiah had been born. Later wise men, obviously very rich to be able to travel as they did and offer such valuable gifts came and worshipped Jesus. From the gospel record it appears that they had no special revelation about the Child Himself - only the appearance of an extraordinary star, but their journey and their gifts to him

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indicate that they too believed that this was a sign that this child would grow up to be a prominent figure who would bring change to the world . We do not know if they had any knowledge beyond this.

For the rest of the people of that time however, with only the exceptions of Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, Mary had simply given birth to a baby. As far as Jewish society was concerned, the birth of a male child only established Mary's status as a mother within her community and Jesus would have been expected to grow up and develop and learn the ways of His people, just as any other Jewish boy would. But apart from the 6 people mentioned, no one else would have known the divine intervention in that particular birth. So it is when we ponder the fact that Jesus entered our world via a normal human birth and was prepared to follow the normal pattern of human development, living in obscurity until the beginning of His public ministry; and what He gave up to do so, that gives meaning to the wonder, praise and gratitude that we express in our carols and hymns.

From heaven You came, helpless Babe, Entered our world, Your glory veiled,

Not to be served but to serve and give Your life that we might live.

This is our God, the Servant King

He calls us now to follow Him, to bring our lives as a daily offering of worship to the Servant King.

We really are fortunate because our worship is based on our possession of both the Old and New Testaments. And it is Isaiah's prophecies, our knowledge of their fulfilment in the birth of Jesus and our subsequent knowledge and understanding of the significance of that lead us to the second part of Isaiah's statement - a son is given. For Isaiah these words would have meant a son was given by God willingly, without any demand for payment or as a result of prayer. God gave a Son because it was in His mind and will to do so. And because a Son was given in this way, it is right and proper that we should regard the birth of Jesus as a gift from God to the world at large, not just to a particular family. That is why Christians today maintain a tradition of giving gifts. But there is a growing feeling now that the commercialisation of Christmas has led to this tradition getting, in many cases, completely out of hand. Giving Christmas gifts sometimes leads to more stress and frustration because of the expectations of others. I sometimes think an unexpected or surprise gift - not on your Christmas list - is now a rarity rather than the norm. And isn't that kind of gift more appreciated. There is a pleasure of anticipation of wondering what's inside the wrapping. It is true that sometimes a surprise gift disappoints. Yet, if it is something that is really needed or wanted and will give you pleasure and benefit far into the future, because the person who gave it obviously had you personally in mind when it was chosen, that sense of appreciation and gratitude often outweighs the actual cost of the gift itself.

That is the kind of gift God gave us at Christmas, except that our sense of appreciation and gratitude could never outweigh what it cost God to come to us in this way. It was unexpected and it came as a surprise because the coming of the Messiah into the world as a baby was inconceivable to Jews and a fairy story to sceptics today. But for Christians, it is a mystery beyond our capacity to explain rationally, but nevertheless, an essential article of our faith. This Child, conceived as the Apostles' creed says, by the Holy Spirit, was nothing less than the sinless Son of God - God Himself entering our world as a human baby and consenting to go through all that human childhood to manhood entailed as a member of a human family and community.

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I hesitated about saying that an unexpected gift needs to be unwrapped to find out what's inside, but it's the only way I could convey the fact that the words 'a son is given' means much, much more than the obvious statement that a male child has been born.

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see. Hail the Incarnate Deity.
Pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel.

We sing these words and sometimes speak quite glibly of God Incarnate, but pondering of how or why God planned in the mists of eternity to enter this world at this particular time in this particular fashion, leads us to the fact that the Christmas event is the first time in the Bible the joint action of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit is mentioned. And one way of understanding the term 'God Incarnate' is through the words of the angels to the shepherds and God's words to Isaiah.

Luke 2:10

Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;

I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no saviour. Isaiah 43:3 &11

.....Then all mankind will know that I, the Lord, am your Saviour, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.” Isaiah 49:26

Salvation was always in the mind of God for He alone can be the Saviour. But for all mankind to know that He was their only hope of salvation, God chose to come to earth in Person to bring about that purpose for His human creation. He knew that to redeem humanity only a human being, born of His Spirit, who could match Him in holiness, righteousness and justice could achieve that kind of redemption from the penalty of sin.

For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ **Romans 5:17**

Luke records for us the angelic announcement of God the Saviour arriving in the Person of His Son, Jesus. In other words, just as Jesus, Himself was wisdom personified, so the gift of a Sinless Son embodied God's whole plan of humanity's redemption because the gift of His righteousness could then be imparted to believers in Him by the gift of the same Spirit that brought about His conception.

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. **Acts 10:45**

All we can do is be grateful that God acted in the way He did for He knew exactly what the world needed, and the state of the world today, proves it still needs a Saviour. In one sense, I wish it could be Christmas every day, because it would not let people, friend or foe to Christianity, forget that the gift of a Saviour has been offered to all. It's a tragedy that the world in general rejects this gift because it contains within it everything the world needs to make it a better place.

PONDER ANEW....

What would you say that the world needs most? The world reckons ‘All you need is love’ not realising that God has already supplied all the love the world needs. The foremost thing that has to be said about Jesus’ birth is that it comes literally ‘with love from God’. “A Son is given” takes us directly to probably the most well known verse in the Bible

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes on Him will not perish but have eternal life. **John 3:16**

Where would we be today if Jesus had not been born? All that we are, all that we believe, all our experience of the presence of God and the work of God in our lives stems from the one fact - Unto us a child is born, a son is given. “Ponder anew what the Almighty can do, who with His love doth befriend thee.” Of all that could be said, love is an especial aspect of the gift of a Son. Love motivated God who gave His Son so that none should perish but all could have everlasting life if they believed in the One He had sent. Love motivated Jesus throughout His time on earth. In thought, word and deed He demonstrated God’s love. and it is Jesus Himself who tells us the extent of the love with which God befriends us for just being born was the first step He took on His way to dying on a cross.

Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. **John 15:13**

In short, God loved us so much He was prepared to die for us. The dynamic and motivation for all Christian being and activity is love and this truth runs through the whole Bible.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your mind and love your neighbour as yourself. **Deuteronomy 6:5**

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. **1 John 4:9**
1 John 4:9

We love because he first loved us. **John 4:19**

This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. 3 In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, **1 John 5:2-3**

Regardless of what context we use, we cannot get away from the evidence that, in the birth of Jesus, God’s love was manifested to the world. We sing Biblical truth when we sing “Love was born at Christmas.”

Apart from love, the other thing that the world needs, particularly as we see the plight of so many people caused all the various forms of ‘man’s inhumanity to man’ is hope for a better future. Again, because of the gift of a Son who brought such immeasurable love into the world, there is a new kind of hope at work in our world. It is interesting that the first line of ‘When a child is born’ speaks of ‘A ray of hope.’ Jesus was more than a ‘ray of hope.’

PONDER ANEW....

**Yet in your dark streets shining is everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in you tonight.**

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; Isaiah 9:2

Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum....to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—16 the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

Matthew 4:13-16

The words of our carol echo the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament which were intended to give a despairing faithful remnant hope for a better future when they would know with certainty God was truly Immanuel. Again we are fortunate because we have the assurance from the frequent use, particularly of prophecies from Isaiah, in the New Testament that Jesus' birth signified, a new hope, not just for the Jews but for the whole world. Paul goes as far as calling Jesus 'our hope.'

**For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope
Romans 15:3**

And again, Isaiah says,

“The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope.”

Matthew 12:17 also quotes Isaiah

In his name the nations will put their hope.”

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Saviour and of Christ Jesus our hope,
1 Timothy 1:1**

It has been noticed that the word hope only appears 3 times in the 4 Gospels. The simplest explanation is that the Gospels only take us as far as the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. It was not until Pentecost that the full significance of Jesus' ministry was imparted to the disciples by the Holy Spirit and Paul, later, by a Damascus Road experience. The rest of the New Testament writings mention hope 67 times, the majority of them referring to the hope that believers have in and through Jesus.

**in the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time,
Titus 1:2**

**so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.
Titus 3:7**

**Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.
Hebrews 10:23**

**Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.
Hebrews 11:1**

PONDER ANEW....

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6:23

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

1 Peter 1:3

These few examples show that what the song is waiting and hoping for is already a reality. I said last week that a non-negotiable article of faith is belief in the virgin birth of Jesus, for only a sinless human being could become the Saviour of the world. And the ultimate hope of that salvation is the gift of a new spiritual birth leading to eternal life. Paul tells us that that wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that our hope of this is an anchor for the soul.

God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf...

Hebrews 6:18-20

God cannot lie. He gave the gift of His Son to be born as a Baby in Bethlehem to provide for a world that rebelled against the gift of salvation with all the eternal spiritual blessings that that entailed. Because of the divine joint action in the birth of Jesus in the present we enjoy the blessings of

....grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.....

2 Corinthians 13:14

And the hope that is the anchor for the soul will one day bring us face to face with the glorified Immanuel, where all the hopes expressed in the song 'When a child is born' will be an eternal reality.

But a child that will grow up and turn tears to laughter Hate to love, war to peace and everyone to everyone's neighbour And misery and suffering will be words to be forgotten, forever

Revelation 21:1

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"

PONDER ANEW....

WEEK 3: THE NAME

What's in a name? Well, what comes to mind when you see these brand names? Harrods, Rolex, Ferrari, Tiffany, etc. The one thing they all have in common is that they all indicate some form of expensive luxury and would be generally recognised as such. It's almost as if the names themselves have taken on a life of their own. Names are so important. Just think of the number of books you can buy now helping you to choose a name for a new baby. And every company thinking of going into business will carefully choose a name that will reflect positively on it. Think what life would be like if people, places and things didn't have names. We wouldn't know who we were talking to or talking about (in the nicest possible way, of course!). We wouldn't know where we are, where we've been or where we're coming or going to. And what if everything was a thingamajig or a whatchamacallit? Life would simply be chaotic. Aren't you glad now that God invented the practice of naming things at creation, for when you read Genesis 1, names were an integral part of creation. God Himself named the parts of His creation day, night sky, land, sea. Then in Genesis 2:19-20 God delegated this task of naming things to Adam.

Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, he birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.

What took precedence over all of these earthly things however was the name God gave Himself. From the time God began to interact with His human creation, the name He revealed progressively revealed what kind of deity He was. As we've heard before, to ancient people knowing the name of their deity was tantamount to having a manifestation of that deity, and therefore the name was treated with the greatest respect and veneration. So, any revelation of God's name was to be taken very seriously indeed.

When Genesis was written the name for God was Elohim, which scholars say establish God as an almighty, powerful creative ruler. It is also plural, hence the reference in Genesis 1:26 when God says "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness..... And each new encounter with humanity added another dimension to this one name. It is when we come to Moses that those additions take on greater significance, for Moses was to lead the people that God chose to be witnesses to Him in the world. It was essential for them to get to know Him in order to be able to do that, and God chose to reveal Himself to them through His name.

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you,' Exodus 2:14

Furthermore, the Israelites were given information about God that had not been given to the patriarchs. And the name 'the Lord' was the revelation Moses was to take to the Israelites.

In Exodus 6:3 & 6 God told Moses.

I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord, I did not make myself known to them.

Therefore say to the Israelites: "I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty at of judgment.

PONDER ANEW....

Because God's name was a revelation of His Person, any disrespect for it was, in effect, disrespect for God Himself. God expected His name to be treated with respect and veneration and this is the reasoning behind the 3rd commandment

“You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. Exodus 20:7

That holds true of God to the present day for the meaning of God's names is still the very best way to get to know who God is and what He is really like. There is a book giving 100 names of God in the Bible and what they signify for His Person and character. Only the knowledge and understanding of God as revealed in those names enables us to enter into a real and personal relationship with Him. Given this background, it should come as no surprise to us that when God gave Isaiah the prophecy of a Messiah, He chose to reveal what a Messiah would be by giving Him a specific name. Because that name, revealed through the prophecy of Isaiah is so full of meaning, it's worth taking the opportunity to 'ponder it anew'.

For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders and he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace..... Isaiah 9:6 (NIV)

6 For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace..... (Isaiah 9:6 KJV)

I've put both versions up because there is a very subtle difference between them. The NIV could give the impression that these will be titles he will be given as a result of his earthly doings i.e. that's what people will call him judging by his character and actions. But the King James version, and other versions also, emphasise that these are not separate titles but are all attributes under the umbrella of one Name. When the Messiah comes these will all be what His character and nature already is. This might seem like splitting hairs but seeing how seriously God expected His name to be regarded and respected, having given the 3rd the commandment, then we need to pay particular attention as to whether what Isaiah tells us is an actual name or not.

That is because the name revealed to Isaiah was the name that had been given to the Messiah by God. We saw the significance of the name Immanuel given to the child who would be born of a virgin, and Isaiah now takes us to what is included in that name. We can also see from the four designations in chapter 9 that these were not designations given to an adult who had earned them through his earthly office or career. These designations were those of a new born Baby. They were part and parcel of His being and personality from the moment of birth. That takes us to another remarkable observation. Nothing could establish the humanity of a person more than a natural birth. Yet the totality of the name and its implications are those of a divinely appointed ruler. Again it may seem as if too much is being read into Isaiah's statement, but the more you ponder what he is foretelling, you cannot escape the notion that the underlying concept in his words is that the Messiah will be both human and divine.

It is also clear that His destiny is already decided. A king in Isaiah's time held the greatest office in the land. The mention of 'government', 'kingdom', 'throne' is an indication that the child born will

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hold the highest position known to people of the time. But there will be major differences between His rule and that of earthly kings. The foremost difference is that His kingdom will last ‘from that time on and forever.’ I did ask myself if the words ‘from that time on’ meant from the moment He was born. There seems no difficulty in asserting that Jesus was born a king. Quite apart from the reference to Him being the heir to David’s throne which would convey that to the Jews, the gift of gold from the Gentile wise men, was a further indication that they too had an inkling of the kingly status of the infant they had travelled so far to worship. Since, in the the divine plan, Jesus was born a king, it is not far-fetched to say Isaiah’s words imply that His kingdom was also coming into being at His birth.

But for Christians today, those words become more than an implication. With the benefit of hindsight and knowing that the primary message of Jesus’ three-year ministry, was the preaching and teaching about the coming of the Kingdom of God, of which He was the ‘first-fruit, we can justifiably say that Isaiah’s words, do mean that His kingdom would last from the moment He was born into an eternity beyond the existence of this world. When we read the history of the kings of both Israel and Judah in the Old Testament and how precarious their tenure in office was at times and how both kingdoms were eventually destroyed by the Assyrians and Babylonians, Isaiah’s prophecy of the certainty of an eternal kingdom, based only on the premise that a child will be born, is an amazing claim. The only thing that could have convinced Isaiah to proclaim this to the folk of his day was his absolute belief that “The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”

Again it is our privilege to be able to see what is in the Name that the zeal of the Lord will accomplish because of our possession of both the Old and New Testaments. Take ‘Wonderful Counsellor’. In Isaiah’s day a human counsellor occupied strategic offices in national government. A counsellor often acted an advisor to the king, especially on matters of national defence and plans for war. It could be said that Isaiah’s prophecies addressed to King Ahaz fell into this category. We read in Isaiah 7 that Isaiah met King Ahaz to tell him to keep calm and not to be afraid of the kings of Damascus and Samaria because, God had said, their threats would come to nothing.

The sign that this threat would come to nothing was that of ‘a virgin will be with child.’ But when it comes to the name given to that Child, Isaiah reveals he has a much loftier view of who a wonderful counsellor is. At various points in the book Isaiah draws a sharp contrast between worldly counsel and the unmatched counsel of God. For Isaiah, God is the supreme, infallible Counsellor and by proclaiming this aspect of the name given to the Child he prophesied, Isaiah is proclaiming His counsel will be as wondrous as that of God Himself and it will be as unfailing in the depth of the spiritual wisdom it expresses. This counsel, according to Isaiah, goes beyond the merely human.

Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things, things planned long ago **Isaiah 25:1**

Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord, or instruct the Lord as his counsellor? 14 Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge, or showed him the path of understanding? **Isaiah 40:13-14**

The wonderful things planned long ago included the sending of His Son into the world and the Son given embodies all the knowledge and understanding of God Himself. That is what is included in the name ‘Wonderful Counsellor’ and we can verify this in two ways. God told Moses that if a

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prophecy comes true, then it is a word God has spoken. God gave His Messiah this name and Jesus proved the prophecy true, as we have seen by being the wisest Counsellor ever to walk this earth and also by granting to believers His Spirit - Immanuel = God with us.

If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. Deuteronomy 18:22

My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Colossians 2:2-3 NIV)

But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. John 16:7

We can't tell what was in the mind of Isaiah when he was given the revelation of this name for the child he was told to prophecy about. Just this one aspect of the Name would have been enough to convince him that the Messiah was divine because He had the attributes of God. But, God went further telling him to also mention 'Mighty God'. To give this name to a child born sometime in the future would have been considered rank presumption, if not outright blasphemy deserving death, to pious Jews. Yet, Isaiah has no hesitation in using the designation which had been given to God in the past and was one of his own first declarations about the Person of God.

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. Deuteronomy 10:17

“The Mighty One, God, the Lord! The Mighty One, God, the Lord! He knows! And let Israel know! If this has been in rebellion or disobedience to the Lord, do not spare us this day Joshua 22:22

Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. 9 Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.10 Who is he, this King of glory? The Lord Almighty — he is the King of glory Psalms 24:8-10

The Mighty One, God, the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to where it sets. Psalms 50:1

Therefore the Lord, the Lord Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel, declares: “Ah! I will vent my wrath on my foes and avenge myself on my enemies. Isaiah 1:24

Another key theme in Isaiah is the mightiness of God's power as Creator and as Lord of history. His might extends to the redemption and restoration of His people and their absorption into the future glorious kingdom He would establish. In doing this every form of evil would also be overcome. When we think of the evil that exists in the world today, it is hard to imagine that one day it will be totally and utterly defeated, all because a child was born. That a child would be the means of overcoming the extent of evil that exists and has always existed in the world is, when you ponder it, an incredible claim. Nevertheless, it is hard to deny from Isaiah's words, that he believed the child would come into the world already endowed with the mighty power of God. It may be hard

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for us to come to terms with such an assertion, but it is another example of what Jesus gave up to be born, for as the carol puts it - 'Mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die. Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.'" Because Jesus was born, we can be born again and enter into the kingdom that will be established and upheld for ever.

Then, we learn that the he governance of the eternal future of our world was delegated to the Son that was given. And it was the angel's announcement to Mary that confirmed the truth of Isaiah's prophecy.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." Luke 1:32-33

For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. 2 Peter 1:16

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he "has put everything under his feet." 1 Corinthians 15:25-27

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Revelation 20:14

New Testament writers has no hesitation in ascribing majesty to Jesus, nor do they hold back in maintaining that His reign is a present reality and that it will continue until He has completed the task of finally destroying Satan and death. Our carols reflect this conviction

Born a king on Bethlehem's plain, Gold I bring to crown Him again

Noel, Noel, Born is the King of Israel

And He reigns because of the burden He bore while on earth. Shoulders both literally and metaphorically have always been the weight bearing parts of our body. We talk of having the weight of the world on our shoulders and in Greek mythology, Atlas was punished by having to bear the weight of the heavens on his. God combines both the governance of heavens and earth and His Son was tasked with a burden that only a Mighty God could bear.

This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases." Matthew 8:17

"He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." 1 Peter 2:24

To harmonise the realms of holy perfection and a sinful planet, needed someone who could, in His Person, bring a rebellious humanity into line with the justice and righteousness of heaven. This is the ultimate goal of the reign of which there will be no end.

And still Isaiah has not finished. Everlasting Father. That threw me a bit. How could the Son be the Everlasting Father? In the ancient world, fathers played a pivotal role in society and it was the

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father who determined both the status and the conduct of the family, more often than not, an extended family. Due respect and honour were expected as the 5th commandment shows and that is why the the parable of the prodigal son would have had a very dramatic effect on those who heard it in Jesus' time.

“Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you Exodus 20:12

In addition to this, fatherhood was a flexible concept to the Israelites. Isaiah mentions the Abraham in the context of him being the father of the nation.

look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth Isaiah 51:2

Kings and rulers often referred to themselves as the ‘father’ of those they ruled over, and we have a 20th century example of that in Germany’s ‘fuhrer’. But beyond all these kinds of references, to the Israelites their supreme father was God Himself, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Malachi all have insights into the fatherhood of God.

Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Isaiah 64:8

They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel’s father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son Jeremiah 31:9

Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another Malachi 2:10

I can’t speculate on whether or not Isaiah’s audience would have been at least a bit puzzled about his statement of the Son being the Everlasting Father, but we don’t have that problem about the prophecy for we have seen it fulfilled in Jesus. The word that was most often on the lips of Jesus was the word ‘Father’ and in John’s gospel we have the most explicit statements that Jesus and the Father are one and the same. We’ve said it before and we’ll probably say it many times again, that this is a mystery beyond our comprehension. But in relation to Isaiah’s prophecy that ‘unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given’ the accuracy of the name ascribed to Jesus is totally exact in all its significance.

I and the Father are one.” John 10:30

Jesus answered:“Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? 10 Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? John 14:9-10

The truth of Isaiah’s prophecy that a child would be born, that a Son would be given and the outworking of the Name that He would bear comes to fruition in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth and in all the events of His life, death, resurrection and ascension. That all of this could be expressed in one Name, centuries before it happened, is just one measure of the Bible’s ‘unsearchable riches’ and

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just one example of the amazing kind of connections that make the Bible so reliable, because all of its contents fit together to tell the one story.

For those of you who have read this passage - you will have noticed - I have left one designation out - Prince of Peace. That is the climax of the Name that I'll look at next week. But together with what has already been said, I think we can all agree that Paul spoke true when he said that God, even before His birth, had given Jesus a name that was above every name - a name that defined His deity, His mighty power, His righteous and just majesty and His victorious, everlasting reign over an eternal kingdom.

**His Name is higher than any other,
His Name is Jesus, His Name is Lord
His Name is Wonderful, His Name is Counsellor,
His Name is Prince of Peace, the Mighty God.....**

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father
Philippians 2:9-11

On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.
Revelation 19:16

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WEEK 4: THE PEACE

Christmas, at least in theory, is a time of peace and goodwill, so it seemed right to finish these Advent talks by ‘pondering anew’ this part of the name of the Child that would be born. Also, while the name of Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God and Everlasting Father all have great significance, it is a very wide-ranging significance because you can’t pin any of these designations down to one particular thing. That is why when Isaiah does make a part of the Name very specific, it perhaps deserves to be pondered about a bit more.

Take the word ‘Prince’. It immediately fits in with all the other references to royalty in this text. As we have seen, royal deity is indicated in all the other descriptions used by Isaiah and the prince in this case points to the Child being the Son of God, whom the Jews still regarded as the ultimate King. In the majority of cases, when the word ‘prince’ is used in the Bible it usually refers to human rulers, but at turning points in history the title points to Jesus. Isaiah spoke of this Prince before the Babylonian conquest. Daniel prophesied during that exile a future when the Prince of princes would defeat a particularly evil individual. In the New Testament Peter and John have no hesitation in ascribing the title to Jesus. Peter’s testimony before the Sanhedrin not long after the birth of the Church directly referred to Jesus as a Prince. And, as John foretells the end of the age, Jesus still bears the title of Prince.

For to us a child is born,.....And he will be called.....Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. Isaiah 9:6-7

He will cause deceit to prosper, and he will consider himself superior. When they feel secure, he will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes. Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power. Daniel 8:25

God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. Acts 5:31

And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth..... Revelation 1:5

It is obvious from these references that giving Jesus the title of Prince means much more than any son born of an earthly monarch. There is the implication that Jesus is not on a par with them, but that His status is far above them. Therefore when He is specifically identified as the Prince of Peace, that means that this concept of peace goes beyond any worldly definition of it. And whether or not our secular society will admit it, this princely concept of peace finds its origin in the angelic announcement to the shepherds of the peace and goodwill to those on whom God’s favour rests. At that moment in time, God’s favour fell upon the whole world for the One who could make the world a place of peace and goodwill had been born.

I know it sounds a daft question, but why do we specifically need a Prince of Peace? You would be quite right in asking if I hadn’t seen today’s headlines or know about the vote in parliament to bomb Syria. The thing is, people in Isaiah’s time would have responded in a similar way. They too were living under the threat of attack and invasion and exile. Ironically, in Isaiah’s day too, Damascus was at the centre of the threat of war. The world is full of conflict. It always has been and, according to Jesus, it always will be. And this will happen because human beings are not prepared

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to take the steps necessary to get rid of the sin that causes so much suffering and devastation in the world.

You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things MUST happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places

Matthew 24:6-7

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. John 3:19

So the lack of peace in the world today is the result of the response of the people of the time and people down through the ages to God's offer of His favour. The response has been one of denial, rejection and a determination to attempt to establish a humanly constructed peace. The most prominent example of this has been the formation of the United Nations, which was established to prevent war and keep the peace between nations. You just have to look back to the wars and conflicts that have happened since it was formed in 1945 to see how spectacularly it has failed to keep the peace through international co-operation. It's failure to achieve such co-operation, especially over the Middle East conflicts, has led to a spiralling spread of violence and an increase of human misery today, that commentators agree has not been seen since the Second World War.

Going by what the Bible teaches, we have to admit that global organisations like the United Nations, national campaigns like that of the campaign for nuclear disarmament or even more parochial ones like the Peace People in Northern Ireland, will ever have, at best, limited success. While every effort at conflict resolution has to be applauded, at the end of the day, it will not bring true peace to the world.

This is also true of personal attempts to find inner peace. Down through the ages people have developed strategies or engaged in movements like monasticism to quell the inner mental and emotional turmoil of their life situations. Alcohol and various kinds of drugs have offered escape throughout history. In the modern age, psychotherapy, yoga and other forms of transcendental meditation and environmental readjustment have eased some of the burdens. I think 'Mindfulness' is the current buzz word. There is no doubt again, that some of these things have provided the help some people have needed to quell or control inner conflicts. But the levels of stress recorded in our society is evidence that these, too, have had only a temporary or partial success.

Now I know I've given a very depressing prognosis for human efforts at peace keeping and making. But in recognising that scenario, if we want to learn what real and true peace is, we need to look elsewhere for it. That is why as we 'ponder anew' the Christmas story, we need the reassurance that, in spite of the trouble and turmoil in the world, there is a peace to be had. There is a peace that we can experience. There is a peace that we can tell others about. There is a peace that will not only keep the sin that causes all kinds of conflicts at bay in the here and now, but will one day completely defeat it and usher in the age of everlasting peace which Isaiah prophesied. And the only way that that will eventually happen is when the Prince of Peace becomes our definition of peace and our model for achieving it. As we've seen, failure is inherent in every human effort to bring peace to the world simply because sin leads the majority of people in the world to ignore or reject the only way that peace can prevail on our planet. Because they have left the Prince of Peace

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out of all their deliberations and actions, they have no true knowledge or understanding of what real peace is and the means to achieve it.

The Church from its earliest days has recognised Jesus as the Prince of Peace, so if we want to be at peace this Christmas, He is the Person we should concentrate on. We start with the fact that the Prince of Peace is the greatest of all peace-makers because just by being born, He set in motion the means by which peace could again be established between God and humanity. It is not an exaggeration to say that every single conflict that arises has its roots in the fact that humanity is at enmity with God. In sending His Son on a peace-making mission, God has done all in His power, in complete compliance with His standards of justice and righteousness, to make peace with humanity. We just have to see the world's rejection of Christ to see that His efforts have not succeeded with the majority of people in the world. But, God has not given up. He still holds out that offer of peace and will continue to do so until He decides the timing of the end of the world. That He continues to do so in accordance with His love for His human creation and His patient mercy and compassion for them, for He knows the fate of those who stubbornly refuse to make peace with Him. In His divine wisdom and governance of His whole creation, He has also decreed that the only way that peace can be established on earth, is if peace is established with Him first, for one of His attributes is peace. And He sent His Son to enable this peace to be offered to the world.

It is the apostle Paul who states this for us. Paul says in verse 14 of Ephesians 2, Jesus Himself is our peace. Jesus is peace personified and so only true and lasting peace can come through Him. Because an essential attribute of Jesus is peace, we can believe the Bible when it makes two great assertions. The first is found in the message of the angels. We sing it as 'peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.' That was the purpose for the Prince of Peace's coming to earth. The greatest conflict to be resolved on earth is the enmity that exists between God and humanity. The peace Jesus preached and still preaches today is that the Prince of Peace could eradicate the enmity between God and His human creation.

For he himself is our peace..... Ephesians 2:14

You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. Acts 10:36 N

He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. Ephesians 2:17

For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Romans 5:10

Real peace is only made possible by the reconciliation between a holy God and a sinful humanity. This is the only foundation on which any peace that we will find on this planet rests. The Incarnation made this possible, and in spite of the tumult of the world around us, this is a peace that each of us can experience now. Repentance and faith in the atoning work of the Prince of Peace leads to the forgiveness of sin and reconciliation to God. Through that belief we have the peace of knowing that God's favour rests on us, because Jesus said

....the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. John 16:27

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The second assertion that the New Testament Church was convinced of and has passed on to us, is the centrality of the peace through Jesus Christ alone. There are 89 mentions of the word in the 26 books of the New Testament. Peace figures in all the greetings to the Christian communities that made up the New Testament church, and the origin of that is found in the words of Jesus before His crucifixion.

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world **John 16:33**

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid **John 14:27**

In other words, because Jesus is our peace, what He left with His disciples and what He gives to every believer since, is Himself. He does this through the Holy Spirit and with Him comes many benefits of peace that we often take for granted. It is only as men and women are reconciled to God that an inner peace enables us to face the troubles and turmoil of the world because that peace gives us the assurance that whatever happens, God is in control. Jesus mentions the trouble we will experience in the world. And it is hard not to feel at least some anxiety about the things that are happening in our world - for example, the threat of terrorist activity on our own doorstep. None of us in this room can guarantee we will not be caught up through our families, friends or community, in future military or civil conflicts that are not of our making. Yet Jesus tells us not to worry about such possibilities and not to be afraid. The peace that He offers is the peace that gives us the confidence that He is in control of every situation that may affect us. That comes in spite of the fact that we do not know why God allows the evil to continue and cause such misery. But we can be sure that even though His permissive will, on the surface, seems to indicate that He doesn't care about our world or cannot do anything about it, He does care and in His own time, as the hymn puts it, He will “restore the honour of His Name in works of sovereign power, He will shake the earth again.”

The assurance of God's sovereign control leads to inner peace in other matters. It is the peace that reaches into our inner being, through knowing that just as nothing happens in the world without God's knowledge, so nothing happens to us without His permission. Even in the worse situations, that individual assurance is in Jesus' words. Compare the mental gymnastics people put themselves through to achieve this, compared to the simple prayer for the guarding of our hearts and our minds. That is what results in the kind of inner peace that the world cannot understand.

And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand **John 10:28**

The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace
Romans 8:6

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, **Romans 14:17**

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus **Philippians 4:7**

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Ultimately, it is only as we believe in and embrace the kind of peace that the Prince of Peace offers us, that we can ourselves then seek to live at peace with our everyone else. That too, pays a peace dividend whether we succeed in our efforts or not, for peace and goodwill, are not just for Christmas, but all year round. If we are followers of the Prince of Peace, then we have a role to play in spreading the peace that He has given to us.

I've mentioned before that Jesus broke down many barriers that enabled conflicts to be perpetuated at all levels of society. Paul mentions race, social status and gender, all of which have generated greater or lesser conflicts throughout time and will continue to do so. Paul also shows us in Ephesians that the greatest divide in his day, between Jew and Gentile was overcome by Christ through their mutual reconciliation to God. That is the pattern the Prince of Peace expects us to follow today.

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
Galatians 3:28

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility
Ephesians 2:14-16

We might ask how on earth any one of us as individuals can stop conflicts. God does not expect us to deal with international conflicts. He has given the state the power of the sword to do that. Also, the Bible recognises that while we may seek to be at peace with everyone, not everyone will be prepared to be at peace with us. It is for perhaps that reason that Jesus said "Blessed are the peacemakers" not "Blessed are the peace keepers." All peace destroying occurrences are the result of sin and one of the wiles of Satan is to deliberately create dissension so that, as the apostle Paul recognises, peace keeping at times may be impossible. Satan can exploit differences of colour, class, creed and culture to cause suspicion, hostility and hatred to stop peace happening. Also, peace keeping may be impossible if it is expected at the expense of condoning, compromising with or permitting something which God condemns and are in direct disobedience to His commands. That is not to say, however, that no attempt should be made to make peace, even in these kinds of circumstances.

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. **Romans 12:18**

Peace making means trying to reconcile differences or to fix something that is already in need of repair. Every Christian is responsible for peace-making, if it is within their power to do so. In such circumstances, all that God requires of the Christian is not to make the situation worse, and, where possible, to attempt to bring about reconciliation or a settlement to a problem. An individual is only responsible for maintaining his or her part of the peace making process. Even if we fail, we will still have the blessing of God for making the effort. Especially within families, and the church family is included in this designation, a peace maker is a very valuable asset, for their focus will be on God's view of the situation, not that of self-interest. So, when conflict arises in whatever circumstance, peace-making should be the first response of Christians. It is in those situations, the the Prince of Peace, is manifested and where His peace can bring about a sincere and lasting resolution of whatever conflict has arisen.

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Finally, the benefit of peace with God through Jesus, who is our peace, is the assurance that we will experience the everlasting peace mentioned by Isaiah.

Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. Isaiah 9:7

Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. 2 Corinthians 5:5

When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory. Ephesians 1:13-14

This is what the Prince of Peace came to fashion us for and that alone would make Christmas worth celebrating.

So, as we come to the end of these Advent talks I recognise that your individual pondering of the Christmas message may not always take the line I have followed; and some things about it may be more significant to you than others. But perhaps one thing about which, I think, we could all agree on is that Christmas is a time when, through pondering this prophecy of Isaiah, we can glorify God for showing us what true love, joy and peace are.

Love **A Son is given:** 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. John 3:16

Joy **Unto us a child is born:** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. **I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.** Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a **sign** to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger
Luke 2:10-12

Peace **....And he will be calledPrince of Peace: Isaiah 9:6**
"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests
Luke 2:14

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