

In our modern culture we love to get excited and worked up about things that are impressive, don't we? We are obsessed with people whose looks are impressive – the Angelina Jolies, the Cate Blanchetts, the Hugh Jackmans and the Hemsworth brothers. We just love them, we want to look like them, we want to dress like them. We want to be them. But we also want to know about people whose intellect is impressive. "Smart" is the new "cool". Entrepreneurs who have been successful fascinates us. Most impressive of all, however, is money. We drool over people whose incomes are impressive. Rich equals impressive, and as long as you are rich you can be famous, even when you have no discernible skills, talents or gifts. We like to be impressed by people, and we like to impress others. Prestige is important to us. Doing the right things, being seen with the right people, wearing the right clothes, earning the right money. The Christmas story as told to us by Luke in his gospel presents a situation that is a complete rebuke to all of that material obsessiveness and passion.

The baby we are told about in this story is the one who is proclaimed as both Christ and Lord. The angel of the Lord says to the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem, "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" (Luke 2:10-11). The word "Christ" means King, because this baby is apparently the Messiah, the long promised King of Israel. The word "Lord" that is coupled with "Christ" means the one who is in charge of all things. "Lord" is the same word that is used for God himself. In fact at the time, the title "Christ" was almost universally understood to be the very Son of God himself. This announcement is, in essence, the declaration of the arrival of the most important and powerful person on earth. And he is born in a stable. A place in an animals' feeding trough-a manger. What a shocking contrast the Christmas story of the birth of Jesus is to the cultural pressure to impress.

In essence, the child who is born is, in truth, a sign himself. He is a sign of the kind of God we should worship. He is the God who becomes a human. Suddenly we are no longer speaking of a distant and impersonal "Creator God" who watches us but is removed and uninvolved in our conditions or circumstances. In his birth, he is called "Immanuel", which means "God with us", according to the ancient prophet Isaiah and the evangelist Matthew, who recorded the account of Jesus' entire life in his gospel. This is the God who willingly and purposefully lays aside his majesty, his might, eternity and glory in order to become something as lowly and accessible as a human being. He is the sort of God who doesn't disdain or despise humanity or the human form. Rather, he embraces it. He is the sort of God who does not arrive demanding the palaces and servants that are his right. No, he is the kind of God who, when he chooses to come among those he has created, also chooses to be born in circumstances that feature humility and accessibility. Why? Because this God has committed himself to our salvation, and in order to save us he becomes like us. He had made a promise long ago to seek out and save those who were lost and dying as a result of their sin and rebellion. He had given expression to his deep desire to be the good shepherd and faithful overseer of our souls. And so, in love and service, the God of the universe takes on human flesh and is born as a baby in Bethlehem.

After declaring the baby to be Christ and Lord, the angel of the Lord goes on to say: "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger (Luke 2:12) Something about the birth of Jesus is a sign. But which bit, and what kind of sign is it? What part of this is the actual sign? It could not possible be the fact that a baby was born in Bethlehem that night. It was a census time! There were thousands of people flowing into Bethlehem from all over Israel. There would have been many heavily pregnant women. The fact that there was a baby born in Bethlehem that night could not possibly have been the sign. Neither was the fact that the baby was "wrapped in cloths" likely to be the sign. Everybody wrapped their babies in swaddling cloths during those times in that part of the world. The sign, therefore, must lie in the final part of the angel's announcement. The actual sign must be the manger. The baby is lying in a manger in a stable. Why a stable? Why a manger?

It is important to note that Christmas story speaks not only of this child's circumstances being humble, but also of these circumstances being brought about for a reason. This birth is not just a scene of humility. It is also a scene of gob-smacking rejection. This baby is born in the stable outside because

there was no room in the inn. Nobody was prepared to give their room to this pregnant mother. Surely someone would have had pity on her? Australian society has a bit of a reputation for being a tough kind of place, but I have seen hardened chauvinists and even people with significant disabilities get out of their seats to allow an expectant mother to sit down I have seen heavy traffic stop to allow a pregnant woman to cross a road safely. You see, in the end there are just some things that we will not, and cannot be, hard-hearted about. The needs of a pregnant mum appear to be one of them. But that wasn't the case in Bethlehem that night. Nobody would hand over their room and bed for her "You can have the stable", said the inn-keeper. That's one hard, hard town.

The Christ-child begins his life in rejection and hardship. If the manger reminds us of anything, it reminds us that the God of glory chose to come to earth, and in coming he chose to lay his glory aside. God chose humility and the circumstances of poverty, hardship and rejection for his arrival. But what do we learn? In these circumstances we learn that despite all the hate-filled atheistic railing against God and Christianity, and despite all the accusations of ignorance and enslavement, the consistent truth about the God of the bible is that the greatest mark of his glory is his unrelenting and steadfast love. What does the curious sign of the manger mean? It means that God loves you so much that he will step away from majesty and choose humility for your sake.

The baby born in a stable is a Saviour. He has come to perform a rescue. This is the first description we are given of him as the angel of the Lord speaks to the shepherds about his birth – "Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you" (Luke 2:11). Yet, Jesus does not save us simply by being born. This is just the beginning of God's salvation plan. Set to come are the 33 years of his life and ministry. The child grows into a boy, and the boy into a man. He loves, and he preaches and teaches the Good News that now is the time to turn away from our rebellion against God and take the step into his kingdom as beloved sons and daughters. In essence his message is, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15)

The Bible tells us that people are drawn from every part of the nation in which Jesus lived, and they commit themselves to him as their Saviour and Lord. They believe that he is, in truth the promised Christ and Lord. But as he preaches and teaches about the kingdom of his Father in heaven, others are stirred up to anger and violence against him. You see, he challenges their comfort. He challenges their authority. Eventually, it is those people who will make false accusations about him, slander his reputation, seize him, arrest him, judge him and murder him by nailing him to a wooden cross. And just as he was born as a Saviour in rejection, so too he will die rejected.

Here is yet another dimension to the curious sign that is the manger. In a very real sense this birth in a stable and the baby's placement in an animals' feeding trough is a foretelling, a foreshadowing, of the greater rejection that this child will suffer in his adult death. It is a rejection that he was destined to suffer. For the prophet Isaiah spoke of him 700 years before he was born: "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering... He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:3,5) It is difficult for many people to understand this part of the plan and purpose of God, but the reason for Jesus' birth is not simply the stable image of Christmas. Rather it is his endurance of the cross on Good Friday and his absence from the empty tomb of Easter Sunday. This child is born for one reason, and for one reason only: to die in your place to take the punishment, to pay the penalty, for your sins so that you might be forgiven.

If that is the case, you must ask yourself: "What took him to that humiliating death and what kept him so resolutely determined to walk toward that cross and that terrible death?" The answer that the Bible gives is this: it was the same love that brought him to our world in the first place. So much did he love you that he was willing to endure this pain and rejection in order to save you and achieved the possibility of your acceptance, forgiveness and love by God the Father. As Jesus himself said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Yes, he is "God the Son". But this is the God who, out of love and compassion, bends down so that he might lift you up and show you how important you truly are in his eyes and within his heart. This is the man who lives a life exactly like yours, but in service to God, and who then surrenders that same life in service to you. Who can fathom a God that would love in such a way? And yet here he is, a baby in a manger who is there so that the people he has come to save might have full and unhindered

access to God. He is there in that humble place so that the shepherds can come and see, without hindrance and without fear. He is there for them, as simple and ordinary as they are. But, of course, Jesus is not only there for the shepherds.

The part of his birth story recorded in Matthew's account in the New Testament also speaks of a more prestigious group of people who are also desperately seeking him. Matthew tells us: "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, magi (wise men) from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him" (Matthew 2:1-2). He is God the Son – whom all of us need to honour as our Lord (our king), just as the wise men from the East did. But he was also born to be a blessing to all who meet him and honour him: The rich and the poor, the young and the old, the local and the foreigner. This boy is born so that an amazing blessing from God might come to every man, women and child who meets him and comes to know him. What is that blessing? It is the blessing of forgiveness, the blessing of new relationship, the blessing of life eternal. This is Christmas as it was actually meant to be. And these are the blessings – the precious gifts that were meant to be remembered, celebrated and received with joy.

Christmas is a sign. The gift is a boy, who will become the man who pays your debt and brings you forgiveness, relationship and life with God – the God who is both your Creator and your Father. It is the gift that has been offered to you, not merely one day each year but 365 days a year. And it is the gift that you can receive and accept every day. Any day. So the phrase "Merry Christmas" really means that we have been brought "good news of great joy". One day each year we set time aside to specifically remember the arrival of God's love, forgiveness and blessing – in the form of a little baby boy, lying in a manger.

Amen

*Prepared by Rev. Grant Lawry, Canterbury Presbyterian Church, Canterbury, Melbourne, Australia for use of the Canterbury congregation.*