

25th December 2020 10 am Christmas In Challenging Times

Service led by and talk by Andrew Attwood, Contributions by too many people to list

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4 Perspectives on Christmas

[by members of the congregation]

Perspective 1

Like many women with children, my thoughts tend to Mary. I can't help thinking of her finding herself in far from ideal conditions in which to give birth. A child is such a precious gift. And we are so lucky to have the amazing Health Service and such caring midwives, to ensure the safety of mother and child. We don't know how long the labour was, but we can just imagine the agony of it. But also we can share the joy of a new birth, a new gift of life, Jesus, and in Him we have the perfect way to live with such a great example, loving our neighbour, and caring for everything in His creation.

Perspective 2

When I think of the Christmas story, of course there's just so much in the story. But above all, it still seems amazing to me that Son of God would come down to earth and be born as a Baby. I think that's so good - it's amazing.

So it's been a difficult year for everyone. As I read the passage again recently, I read that Jesus was born in a stable of course. I remember the verse that says He was placed in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn, and that just reminded me that God is not distant, but somehow He identifies with us, with ordinary people, and also cares about ordinary people. And at times that causes me to be very grateful and I draw comfort from that.

Perspective 3

What interests me about the Christmas story is why God chose Mary and Joseph. God could have chosen anybody, but He didn't. He chose a young unmarried couple, which in those days would have been a real scandal.

And what also strikes me is how willing Mary and Joseph were to do what God wanted them to do, how much faith they had. And I think that that shows firstly, it shows a lot about God's character: that He didn't choose the obvious, maybe a king and queen. He chose people who were just average people, you know, Joseph was a carpenter. You know, nothing special. But He wanted to use them and He can use us regardless of where we are in our lives. And I think that's an interesting part of the Christmas story for me.

Perspective 4

I read the account of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke again this week. Matthew seems to focus on Joseph, and Luke on the shepherds. The birth hardly gets a mention.

I've been lucky enough to witness four births at very close hand, of four children, Ian, Chris, Graham and Ellie. They are all grown up now, one of them with a child of their own. But memories of their births come flooding back at this time of year, the utter amazement at the whole process with the first, the moments of danger with the second one, born in distress, bringing the two big boys to see the third in hospital, and the shock and thrill of having a girl for the fourth.

Giving birth, I have observed, is very hard work, painful and dangerous, but wonderful. So it would have been with Mary and Joseph, with a few added complications such as being in an unknown place with nowhere to call home and visited by angels, shepherds and wise men, hunted by a corrupt king, and holding in their arms the Son of God – the Son of God!

Reading: Luke 2:1-21 [NIVUK 1984]

I'm going to pray now and I'm just going to introduce Rory who will be reading to us: he's going to be reading from Luke chapter 2:1-21, but let me pray first before we have that reading. Let's pray.

Lord, on this special day, when we celebrate Your birth, this moment that changed everything, we pray now that we would hear Your Word again fresh. Even though these are familiar words, help us to hear Your Word and hear how it all began. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to his own town to register.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests."

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

²¹ On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.

Talk

[Andrew:] Let's just continue to pray. Let's pray.

Lord God, there is no way to describe what You have done adequately. There are no words that will ever capture fully what You've done. Lord, just in a moment of stillness, help us see the enormity of Christ's birth in this world.

And Father God, would You help me now just to share a few thoughts. It's impossible to make full explanation of this, but I pray that You'd help me to speak, and that Your Holy Spirit would touch those who hear. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

I'm going to light this larger candle now, because the larger candle on Christmas Day represents Jesus. Jesus is the big candle. And Jesus is the candle that is beyond compare. Whatever the different perspectives that might be shared that focus helpfully on the different human beings gathered around His birth, the main event is Jesus. Now throughout the Bible, God shows His greatness often through small beginnings. You will remember Abraham and Sarah, an elderly couple conceiving Isaac, to begin a nation. And of course you have Moses, the baby in the basket, who turns out to be Israel's rescuer. You have a shepherd boy, David, who becomes Israel's greatest King.

Just pause for a moment and have a think about your own life, consider what small yet significant things have shaped your life's direction. I remember when I was in primary school, a teacher telling me that I'd done a really good drawing. That one phrase stuck in my head and persuaded me that I could do it, and I ended up pursuing art in my further education. All these things that are small can lead to something big. And God seems to know that the most important things often begin small, hidden in seemingly difficult or complex ways. So we turn to Mary and Joseph: ordinary people, no social leverage or influence. There's no real detailed reference in the text to their character particularly, except that they were willing to be used by God. That's all. Mary and Joseph said 'yes' to God. That's all. But they were limited, like you and I, in fully knowing what they were saying 'yes' to. They didn't know what their 'yes' was connected to. But they trusted anyway. And so the story begins. Just imagine the smallest of things that we can almost imagine: the embryo of Jesus Christ in Mary, a delicate, a fragile thing.

We all know about that, we understand the precariousness of carrying a child. And it's not only that, evil swooped in in Christ's story to try and shame the mother, kill the Baby, remove the Child. That was Herod, trying to press in because of this new king that was appearing. But we hear that powerful angels are involved in the story of Christ's birth, shielding Him and the parents from harm. Why? Because God's plan can never fail. The appearance of frailty and smallness belies the connection to Almighty God. Because if anything small is connected to God, it never, ever fails. Anything small, if attached to God, is impregnable, is unstoppable. Nothing can stop God's plan. So we read that under Herod's nose, under the rule of Rome, God was planning to overturn the wicked empire of sin and evil, through whom? Through this little Boy. And so we enter into the hidden years of Jesus rising up, growing up, under His parents' guidance, ready for action.

I just want to talk about DNA. DNA is obviously a modern discovery, a modern scientific piece of information, and most of us know that there is nothing organically really as powerful as DNA. No matter what you do, at some point, you are going to look a little like your parents or even have some of their mannerisms and voice. It's written into your genetics. I was once using one of those face apps that kind of age you prematurely. I was nervous to share it today, so I'm not going to do it, but I just look just like my dad. It's just unnerving. DNA is a powerful thing. And there's nothing you can do about it.

So, we have this toddler, this toddler growing into a teenager, and then into a *tektōn*, a stoneworker, a carpenter. And this particular child/youth is brimming with God's DNA. He's different to everyone else on the planet. That's why He is the big candle. Jesus loves people with complete sincerity and zero self-interest. He never thinks or acts selfishly ever. And He's always responsive to the overwhelming presence of Almighty God. So, this boy brimming with God was like a heavenly weapon with much greater power than an atomic bomb. He was

inevitably going to personally destroy the influence and control of evil in the world. There was no question about this. There was no doubt about it, because with God, nothing can overturn His plans.

Let's talk about viruses and vaccines. We've heard nothing but it for months and months and months, viruses and vaccines. One that reaps destruction and death, and the other that neutralises the destruction. You see, small is not automatically weak. Millions will queue up for a vaccine in this coming year, believing in the expertise of scientists, putting their well-founded faith in the power of two injections. I just want to be measured about this, it's marvellous. But all this vaccine can do is make a person immune to COVID-19, which is really great - but puny compared to Jesus Christ. You see, 2,000 years ago, the vaccine of God came to Earth. And after being hidden for 33 years with complete-self awareness and calculation, He walked into danger on our behalf towards His own arrest. This single small human, this unknown Jew, this speck on the planet, He was falsely tried at night by corrupt leaders. He was handed off to the Romans, and then expertly executed. It looked like it failed. But it was all part of God's invincible plan. Think about it. Think about 2,000 years later, we're all going to be queuing up for a nurse or trained recruits to inject us, and we're going to roll up our sleeves, and we're going to have medicine put in, when our name is called. We're all going to do it. Jesus Christ was nailed to wood and lifted up for all to look at, to die in our place. He calls our name to look. He calls our name to look. And we will roll up our sleeves and let the injection go into our system, and then we will return to get it again, to make sure we get the doses that make it more effective. We'll do it! But 2,000 years ago, in real history, this tiny embryo grew into a man, offering Himself as God's ultimate gift, His ultimate cure for sin, His ultimate invitation into a life that lasts forever.

Can you for a moment take your eyes off yourself. And do you hear His voice? Close your eyes just for a moment and be honest, on this Christmas Day. Close your eyes. Here in 2020, how aware are you of the deeper problem that wracks the human race, an inclination to turn away from God and to live for ourselves? Keep your eyes closed. Do you know in your bones, that there is something wrong with how things are? Even though we often try to deny it. Are you aware of the human race's need for forgiveness? That you need to be put right with God? You see, this is good news! Good news for a bad situation.

This Christmas is a strange ending to a sad year, where the world has lost control for a time. Are you beginning to hear the One who is ultimately in control? This Christmas will we hear God's story? Will we recognise God's interruption? Will you roll up your sleeves and say 'yes' to the Jesus vaccine? You see all this, this little Christmas service, it may seem tiny, it may seem small, but you see, an unstoppable revolution begins when Jesus enters your veins. Jesus said this, "The gates of hell will not prevail against you."¹ Everything that comes your way will not prevail against you, if He is in you, if He is in you, if the King of kings, the Son of God is in you. Now there are many things that aren't significant. But if a small thing has the DNA of the Son of God, even in you, then you will never fail, you will never fade, you will never lose because He never loses.

Just last night. Lindsey and I, we shared carols on our street, on Clarke's Avenue, with our neighbours. It really touched my heart. For many weeks now, Lindsey has been saying we need to do something with our street, and then she started just simply prayer-walking the street, and then she said we need to do something that brings people together on our street and so we put the invites out. And last night we had people playing keyboards, we had a neighbour dressed up as Santa Claus, we had a fire pit, we had people socially distancing but singing carols, and getting to know each other. From my point of view for the first time on Clarke's Avenue, getting to know new neighbours who have only just

1 Matthew 16:18 [ESV]

moved in. Small beginnings. But I've just got a suspicion that that's got the DNA of Jesus in it.

Prayerful Response

What about you? Let's respond to this on Christmas Day. Let's pray. On this Christmas Day, are you willing to lay down control, to let go of your own empire? Just be still and get yourself open to God.

Lord Jesus, still brimming with God's DNA, reigning as King, we focus on You now. We see the light streaming from Your face: unstoppable. Lord, we pray that you would enter our lives, fully, completely, that we would take our eyes off ourselves and focus on You.

Lord Jesus we pray for your light to shine in our church, and in the churches of this town. Jesus we give to You our church again. The church is Yours more than it is ours. And as you lead us out of Christmas, for the sake of the church, lead us into the kingdom of Christ Jesus, where Jesus reigns more than ever before. Lord Jesus, would you lead us away from the preferences that tangle up our lives, and lead us to follow in your footsteps, in the ways of Jesus Christ. I just want to pray, Lord, that You would be close to everyone watching today. If it's the first time they're asking you in, then bless them, help them to know You. If people have done this multiple times, I pray they would see you as the King, brimming with God's DNA, unstoppable, invincible, winning. So open our hearts and open our eyes, Lord. In Jesus' Name we pray, Amen.

More Perspectives on Christmas

We're going to have four more perspectives now, just to help us really enjoy and soak the marrow out of the Christmas story.

Perspective 5

When I read the accounts of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke's gospels, I'm struck with a very powerful sense of reality, and wondering what it must have been like to be there. We see this kind of earthly drama being met by heavenly intervention. And these very real characters that I think we can all relate to in terms of having experienced, in one degree or another, human drama, human tragedy and having to try and avoid it in the case of trying to keep Christ alive, as a Baby. And how these people, much like we are able to, praying and listening to God's guidance, can allow the divine plan to occur here on Earth.

Perspective 6

I think about the preparation. The world is always in a sorry state and God prepared all types of people to meet Jesus: young, old, rich, poor, doubters, those He knew would follow His instructions, those strong enough to stand up to criticism and hardship, all types of everyone.

For Mary and Joseph there would be the criticism they would face, and even then as parents, they realised the challenges their child Jesus would bring them. For them, their child was just lent. They were excited at His entry and distraught at His death, but to us who follow Jesus, He's the greatest Christmas present of all. There was no fancy entry into the world for Him. He wasn't beautifully wrapped up like most Christmas presents are. But for us, He is a forever present. We can put Him in our pocket first thing in the morning, carry Him on our shoulders during the day, and often in the greatest of difficulties feel Him behind us, urging us onwards. So when I think of Jesus' entry into the world, surrounded by the most unlikely guests in forced circumstances, and the love He brought with Him. I realise it's all about God's good planning, and who are we to argue with that?

Perspective 7

One thing that really sticks out to me, reading through the accounts of Jesus' birth, is how God's blessing comes to and comes through a pretty ordinary person, but he starts off his account by talking about how the line of Jesus starts with Abraham, comes from Abraham, who had been incredibly well known (a bit of a celebrity at the time Matthew was writing) and through David as well, who was a saint. But then, that line of God's blessing, that line that leads to Jesus, comes through Mary, who was a pretty bland ordinary person, so far as I can see. So God chooses her to be the person who would bear Emmanuel. From now on, all people would call her blessed. And not only that, that she's used as a vehicle of God's blessing, God is blessing other people through her. That really sticks out to me that that as a pretty ordinary person, I can be both a recipient and a vehicle of God's blessing.

Perspective 8

Oh my goodness. The news of any birth is great joy. But Christ's birth is the most famous of them all ever. I thank God, the most famous birth of Jesus Christ is good news. He came on Earth, not to judge or to destroy, but to save, and bless us all. Thanks be to God.

Conclusion and Blessing

[Andrew:]

Thanks be to God, indeed. Thank you to all the people who have contributed their perspectives to the service. Can we just have a moment of quiet, to just focus on the marvellous story, the marvellous truth of Christ coming to our world.

And so I'm going to conclude our service with a word of blessing. This has been indeed an unusual year. But the whole year has been in the hands of Jesus Christ. And the next year will be in the hands of Jesus Christ. We know what He is like. And so we can trust Him.

So, Lord Jesus, I want to pray in the name of the Father who sent the Son, in the name of the Son who revealed the Father, in the name of the Holy Spirit who indwells us and gives us all the grace we need, I pray Lord for your blessing to rest on all those who are watching, on everyone we know, on our loved ones, on our friends, on our colleagues, on those who are sick, on those who are anxious. And we pray, Lord Jesus, that we would keep in step with you today, and into the new year. Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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