

Sunday 28th November 2021

Glynde Lutheran Church

Sermon on Mark 1:1

Theme: “Should Christmas be banned?”

“Christmas according to the Gospel writers: Mark (No. 1)

Introduction:

Well, what's one of the first things you notice about Mark's Gospel when you start reading it? In Mark's Gospel, there is no Christmas story!! The Gospel begins with Jesus as a 30 year old adult who is seeking baptism from John the Baptist....

But there is no Christmas story! There is no description by Mark of the birth of Jesus, and the events surrounding his birth.

If it were left up to Mark, if we only had Mark's gospel, then in all probability we would not be celebrating Christmas in a few week's time.

Should we perhaps follow Mark's example, and omit Christmas? Given the emphasis in our society on buying things and having fun at Christmas to the exclusion of anything to do with the real reason for the season, perhaps we should skip Christmas celebrations altogether? Perhaps we should ban Christmas?

Well, let's look at what *is* important about Christmas, and then maybe we'll make a decision on whether or not we should ban it
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Part 1: Not how he was born: manger, inn etc.

Well, what is important about Christmas? Well, certainly not **how** Jesus was born....

If the “how” of Jesus' birth was vitally important, Mark *and John* too would have included all the details about Mary and Joseph

and the angels and the shepherds and the Wise Men and so on....

But they don't.... No, all these things are interesting, and they're mentioned by Matthew and Luke in their gospels in order to make certain points about Jesus, but they are certainly **not** vitally important aspects about Christmas.

In any case, our knowledge of the "how" of Jesus' birth is limited.... In fact, the popular understanding of Jesus birth *is* in error in certain aspects and maybe in error in others.

For example, if I asked a group of people **when** Jesus was born, I reckon that the most common answer I'd get would be: "Ah, that's easy: December 25th, in the year O A.D." Wrong, on two accounts:

- 1) Jesus was probably born about 6 B.C. How do we know this? Well, Jesus was born when Herod was king, and Herod died in 4 B.C. (see *Matt. 2:1*). Herod, we told by Matthew, killed all babies aged 2 years and under in an attempt to kill this young king, reflecting an understanding by him that Jesus had been born anything up to two years before the Wise Men arrived on the scene..(*Matt. 2:16*). So, probably Jesus was born in about 6 B.C. or so.... (*R. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah, 166-167*).
- 2) Also, it is highly unlikely that Jesus was actually born on the 25th December of that year. The date, the 25th December, was chosen simply because it seemed a suitable date to celebrate Jesus' birth on. In fact, Jesus was probably born sometime between April and November, because this is the time period that shepherds of that region have their sheep out in the open (see *Luke 2:8*).

And if I asked any group of people **where** Jesus was born, I'm sure that I'd often get the answer:

“Well, that’s easy: in a manger in a cattle shed out the back of an inn in Bethlehem”. Maybe, but then again, maybe not, *probably not!* You see, our understanding of the “how” of Christmas is based on just one verse in Luke’s Gospel, Luke chapter two, verse 7:

Mary gave birth to her first-born son, wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Our understanding of the Christmas events is based on just two words in this verse: “manger” and “inn”.

1) “Manger”

The traditional understanding...moves along the following path. Jesus was laid in a manger. Mangers are found in animal stables. Ergo, Jesus was born in a stable.

However, in the one room peasant house of Palestine and Lebanon, the manger is built into the floor of the house. The standard one room village house is as follows: Living area for the family; Mangers built into the floor for feeding the animals, mostly at night; and a small area about *four feet lower* than the upper living area into which the family cow or donkey was bought at night (*K. Bailey, The Manger and the Inn, 36*).

2) “Inn”

The Greek word translated as “inn” here can also mean “upper room” or “guest room”, as it does later on in Luke’s Gospel where it is used to describe the place where Jesus and his disciples held the Last Supper (Luke 22:11).

The translation “guest room” leads to the following understanding:

Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem; Joseph finds shelter with a family *probably a relative*). The family has a separate guest room, but it is full. The couple is accommodated among the family in acceptable village style. The birth takes place there on the raised terrace of the family home,

and the baby is laid in a manger (*Ibid.*, 40).

Well, that's probably how it happened, *even certainly it seems from a close examination of Luke's Gospel*. But then again, maybe it happened the way we have traditionally understood the birth of Jesus.... But in any case the "how" of Jesus' birth is not what is important....

Part 2: But who was born: "Son of God" (1:1)

No, what is important rather is who was born and why he was born. Firstly, **who** was born?

Mark gives us the answer in our text when he says: "*This is the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God*" (1:1). According to Mark, Jesus was "the Son of God".

In his Gospel, Mark stresses this again and again. Mark records, for example, that twice in Jesus' life, at his baptism and his transfiguration, a voice from heaven said, "*You are my own dear Son*" (1:11; 9:7), and furthermore Mark reports that after Jesus' death a Roman Centurion there stated, "*This man was really the Son of God*" (15:39).

Jesus was more than just another human being: he was the Son of God become a human being. This is not only Mark's confession, but also the confession of every other writer in the New Testament: Matthew, John, Paul, and so on. They confess with one voice that Jesus was the Son of God become a human being! (*e.g.*, *Matt. 16:16; John 1:1,14,18.34; 20:31; Rom. 1:3-7*).

Now why is it important to you and me "who" Jesus was: that he was the Son of God become a human being? Because the only way that we can really know about God and what He is like is if someone close to God, or God Himself, reveals to us what God is like. And that's what God has done for us through His Son, part of His very self. John sums it up at the start of his Gospel when he says:

No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is the same as God and who is at the Father's side, he has made him known (John 1:18).

Through looking at Jesus, and listening to him, we can discover the heart of God, what God is like: that God is a loving and compassionate God, who cares for every human being that He has created.

Can I read to you a short devotion from a little booklet, entitled *Personal Meditations*, that I have:

People fascinate me. I could spend all day watching people walk along the street, if I had time. I think: 'Look at him, I wonder what makes him tick? Look at her. She looks worried'.

People must have fascinated Jesus, too, I think. He certainly had a great love for people. He talked with them, taught them, mixed with all sorts, asked questions, and gave answers. There must have been times when he shook his heart in amazement—and sadness— over people. But that didn't stop his love and his concern for them (p.33)

Yes, Jesus, God's Son, showed great love and concern for people, and in doing so showed to us what sort of God we have: a compassionate, caring God!!

Part 3: And why was he born: "Christ" (1:1)

And secondly, **why** was Jesus born? This, and who Jesus was, are the two most important aspects of Christmas! Well, why was Jesus born? We've already answered this to some extent: to reveal God to us.... But Jesus was born for a reason just as important, if not more important: to suffer and to die for us!!

The word “Christ” in our Bible reading points to this reason. Our Bible reading says:

“This is the Good News about Jesus Christ”

Or maybe as it is better translated:

“This is the Good News about Jesus who is the Christ”.

As Mark tells us in his Gospel, Jesus explained that he was the Christ, the Messiah, who must suffer and die for people (*Mark 8:29,31; 9:31; 10:33-34, 45; 14:22-26*). Jesus, God’s Son, took upon himself our humanity and paid the penalty that we deserve, when he suffered and died for us on a cross.

Have you ever watched the movie “Sommersby”? The hero in this film, is a lot like Jesus. Like Jesus, Jack Sommersby paid a penalty that he didn’t deserve, simply because of who he’d become....

The film is about a Confederate soldier, Jack Sommersby, who returns home after the American Civil War to his wife and his child and his property in the South. But is it really Jack Sommersby?

Well, it’s gradually revealed that it’s not Jack Sommersby, but rather a look-a-like who spent four years with him in a Yankee jail and who learnt virtually everything there was to know about Jack Sommersby.

The new Jack Sommersby is a changed man: a loving husband, a caring dad, and a model citizen who inspires the township to risk all on planting tobacco, and who succeeds in making the township relatively well off. But tragedy comes when Jack is arrested for a murder that the real Jack Sommersby committed. Jack allows himself to be tried and finally hung, rather than have his wife and his son disgraced and his newly born daughter labelled “illegitimate”.

He could have escaped death by confessing that he wasn't the real Jack Sommersby, but he didn't do that out of love for his wife and his children.

Now the point of me telling you all this is that Jack Sommersby suffered and died because he had taken on the identity of the real Jack Sommersby. He paid a penalty that he didn't deserve, because he had taken on the identity of another. And he did it out of love, love for his wife and children.

Likewise, Jesus suffered and died because he, who is the Son of God, took on our identity and took upon himself the punishment that we deserve. And he did that out of love for us!!

So that's what is important about Christmas: not **how** it happened, but **who** was born, and **why** he was born. Christmas is all about the birth of God's Son, Jesus. Jesus, God's Son, revealed to us the heart of God, and furthermore he suffered and died in our stead, taking the punishment that we deserve.

Conclusion:

Should Christmas be banned then? Not so long as it points to **who** Jesus was and is, and **why** he was born.... Not so long as the Christmas story is told and carols are sung about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Saviour.... Not so long as the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God is told!!