

Christmas Eve 2018

Christmas is indeed ... a very.... special time. But it can be easy to forget what is important.

The true meaning of Christmas is not found in the wrappings but in the gift.

And the angel said unto them, "Fear not! For, behold, I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all my people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ, the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the Heavenly Host praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the Highest, and on Earth peace, and good will toward all people."

Now my friends, that is what Christmas is all about. It is about the gift. It is about God with us. It is about God coming to touch us – literally wanting to be with us.

Christmas Eve is the time when the “curtain” between heaven and earth is so thin you can almost see through it. That night is the night we measure all time and purpose against. Simply put, the Good News is about God coming to us and our world in Jesus Christ, so everything is made holy and sanctified. That God so loved the world he came in Jesus. It is simply the greatest love story because God is love.

Consciously or subconsciously, most people, this time of the year, are truly trying to catch a glimpse of God or to connect to something greater than themselves.

Christmas is that one time in the year when many make an extra effort to find real meaning, to find real joy to find real peace and a purpose in their lives.

This is when many people make an effort to look into the heart of God.

Imagine the world at the time of Jesus’ birth. Imagine what Mary saw. Look through her eyes.

The world was very busy - most people were traveling to their hometowns to register for the census – something we now do online when the system doesn’t crash!

Mary and Joseph were two of many thousands of such people. So much hustle and bustle everyone being so very busy. There were so many travellers, that Mary and Joseph find no room in the hotel.

Mary gives birth to a son and lays him in a manger in an area that had been set aside for the housing of animals. But most people really did not notice, most people made themselves so busy that they missed the presence of God.

It's not that people are not interested in God. It's just that that most of the people got caught up in their busyness and they ended up ignoring God.

Our world of today has not changed much. There is still the hustle and bustle.

Everyone so busy. Does that mean that people aren't interested in God?

No. No matter how busy you are, deep down in your soul, there is a desire to look into the heart of God. After all, you are here; tonight! You want to enable a connection to happen.

This evening, I want you to walk into Bethlehem near the manger, and stand next to Mary and see what she sees. What does Mary see? She sees a baby, and she listens for his breathing, watching his chest go up and down; just as every new parent would do.

Yet Mary sees so much more. She remembers the promises of God. She realizes that she is staring into the very heart of God.

And then the shepherds arrive and they tell her what the angel ...had said to them. They crowd around the manger and they too gaze into the face of that child.

And as they do they realize that they are gazing into the heart of God.

Then the shepherds leave, and the Scriptures which were written after the events of the life and ministry of Jesus, reveal that Mary ponders all these things in her heart.

Everything her world needs is right there.

Everything that her hustling and busy neighbours and friends could ever ask for is lying in the manger. It is about the key to understanding God, the key to understanding the meaning of life. The key to eternity is right there, lying in the manger.

Now imagine that Mary lifts the baby out of the manger and she hands him to you.

And there you stand, holding in your arms the one and only Son of God.

And as you look down into his face, you realize that you too are looking into the heart of God. In your arms you have everything that the world is truly longing for. Love. While the rest of the world hustles and bustles, there you are, in the quiet of the night, looking into the face of this child, looking into the very heart of God.

Why? Why would almighty God do this?

And then you look outside and you see a shadow.

It is a bright night the stars are out but one star seems to be shining especially bright yet you also see a shadow, the shadow of a cross. Then you truly understand. You understand why this child came into the world – that He came to give you life. Eternal life. Arms outstretched on a cross – arms reaching out in love.

You cannot help but feel a little saddened as you look into the face of this little child.

Knowing all that he will suffer, you hand the baby back to Mary.

But before you walk away, you take one last look. You see God's love for you, his mercy, His wisdom and His forgiveness. God has touched you this night.

This year, like every year, millions of people, children and adults will open millions of presents. Some will not fit. Some will be the wrong colour. Many will be returned, exchanged, re-gifted or kept in storage.

But there is one gift that meets all our needs, one gift that never breaks, one gift that will never wear out.

A gift that is appropriate for every single person – the most valuable gift of all - Jesus. He promises that if you will trust Him, if you will accept him as your Saviour and Lord, He will set you free and fill you with his Peace and Joy.... A Joy that cannot be taken away. A peace that passes all understanding.

The angels declared it on that Christmas Day "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, good will towards all people"

I would like to finish by telling you a story about a Christmas pageant.... that much like life itself, did not go quite as planned.

Matthew was a spirited nine year old boy with a learning disability but the children all liked him. He was bigger than most of the others but he never bullied them. In fact he would often defend smaller children against bullies.

Matthew wanted very much to be in the Christmas play that year. Thankfully, he was in a school that was allowed to recognise Christmas for its Christian origins. He hoped he could be a shepherd because he loved animals. But his teacher had a larger part in mind. She thought that Matthew was big enough to be the innkeeper.

And he got the part. He practiced really hard to learn his lines and on the night of the play, everything went beautifully. No one had forgotten a line.

At last came the part where Mary and Joseph knocked on the door of the inn.

"What do you want?', Matthew asked, opening the door with a gruff and forceful gesture.

"We seek lodging," came the response.

"Seek it elsewhere, the inn is filled,"

"But sir, we have tried elsewhere. We have come a long way and we are very tired," they responded.

"Go away," Matthew properly commanded. "There is no roomin my innfor you."

"But sir, my wife is going to have her baby. Don't you have a corner where we can get out of the cold?"

For the first time the innkeeper broke his icy stare and looked at Mary. Then came a long silence.

The audience was tense with embarrassment and shuffled to the edges of their seats. They thought Matthew had forgotten his lines.

"No, be gone," the prompter whispered.

"No, be gone," Matthew said half-heartedly.

Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary as they began to move off the stage.

Suddenly, this Christmas play became different from all the others. Matthew could stand it no longer. He could not be so cruel. With big tears welling up in his eyes, he gave a performance no one there would ever forget.

"Wait, don't go Joseph!," Matthew called. "Bring Mary back." Matthew's face grew into a bright smile. "You can have my room and I'll sleep out in the cold."

Some said the nativity play was ruined but others knew better. Matthew caught the real spirit of: a heart of love, a heart of giving, a heart of self-sacrifice. That child in the manger is the light of our world, even when our world is in shambles. For in that child, the Divine and the human cross paths. Christmas is where we find the Christ of God intersecting with all humanity.

Do you have room for him in the Inn of your heart?

Jesus is our living, breathing sign of the immeasurable love that God has for each of us. This is the night when God sent out a great letter of cosmic proportions. Do we open it?

This is the night when Christ entered the world fully God and fully human.

We find that those gathered in his name even us here tonight fall within the embrace of that love.

Christmas is the living and loving promise that we are never ever alone. No matter where we are in life, no matter what condition we find ourselves, No matter how far we might stray, or how unfaithful we are God in all his love, will continue to pursue!

I ask you to take time this Christmas to look into the heart of God and to fully experience his love.

For it is a love that never stops shining.

If we spread more love – the love of God – to one another, as Christ teaches us, then the world and our homes and communities will become different places. It is not too late for more love. Start with one person with whom you may have had a disagreement.

"For unto us is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ, the Lord."

Amen!