

# What are we really celebrating at Christmas?

Christmas Day - 25 December 2022

## BIBLE READING

[Luke 2:8-19](#)

There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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.'

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

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'

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.'

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

[John 1:1-5, 9-18](#)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ...

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the

glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ... From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

## CHRISTMAS REFLECTION

No doubt this year has been **challenging** on many levels ...

- We have had to learn to look out for ourselves when it comes to **covid** as the government has effectively withdrawn from the public health space even while covid continues to spread its unseen suffering and grief
- We have watched with dismay as Russia invaded its neighbour Ukraine and continues to try and grind the country into submission, making life miserable for millions and displacing millions more
- There have been multiple floods up and down the east coast of Australia ... what happens after the TV cameras leave?
- ... and the price of everything seems to be going up – whether mortgages, rent, energy costs, the price of food ...  
... so that poor people are really struggling



These are realities facing us at the end of another challenging year.

By contrast, the Christmas story is filled with **light**, **hope** and **joy**.

It's a story we all know well – about shepherds and angels, and Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus in the manger – even if the reality was much messier than our artworks show.

The story is given importance and credibility by the angel – who speaks for God – and who announces that the baby born in Bethlehem will be **Saviour**, **Messiah** and **Lord**, and the one who will bring **peace on earth**.



This is of course a **retrospective** view based on who Jesus will become and who he is for the later Christian community who worship Jesus as Lord and Saviour, and who wrote the Gospel stories about his life.

The Christmas story that we read from Luke functions as an **overture** to his larger story about the adult Jesus and what he did and taught. And like an overture in music, it introduces key themes or motifs that will feature later.

These include a focus on **marginalised** people – represented here by the **shepherds**, who lived out in the fields near their sheep, but who were often regarded with suspicion.



It's telling that Jesus is born among the poor, not in some grand house or palace but in a rough shed and placed in a feeding troughs for animals. Throughout his later ministry, Jesus will continue to identify with the poor and those living at the margins.

But it's not just the shepherds. Throughout Luke's Advent stories, there is considerable focus on **women** – on **Mary**, Jesus' mother, and on **Elizabeth**, the mother of John the Baptist. Later, of course, Jesus will minister among women and among the poor and will bring them God's good news, just as the angel brought good news to the shepherds.



So if we take our cue from the Christmas story, **our ministry** will also focus on the marginalised – those excluded or forgotten or unseen people that have a special place in the heart of God.

Luke also uses his Christmas story to emphasise that it is **Jesus** who is the **true Saviour** and **Lord** and the one who will bring **true peace** on earth.

Well, that's obvious, you might think.

But at the time of Jesus' birth, these titles and roles were claimed by the **Roman Emperor** or **Caesar** whose spin doctors proclaimed the **Emperor** as the divine Son of God, Lord, Saviour of the world, and bringer of peace on earth.

Emperor **Augustus**, the one responsible for calling the census that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, was considered and promoted as god incarnate, the one who brings peace to the world – but peace through **war** and **violence**.



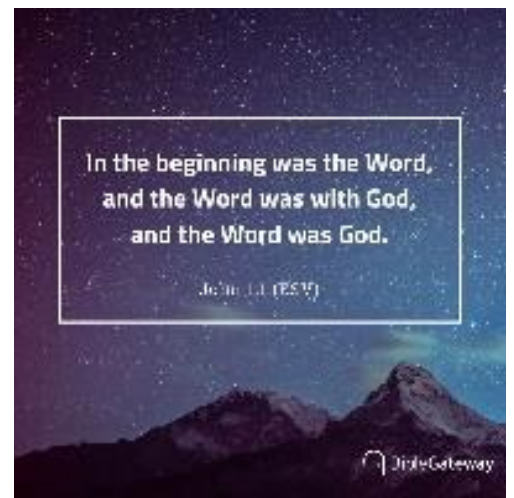
In Luke's subversive Christmas story, it is **Jesus**, rather than the Emperor – or someone like Vladimir Putin or Joe Biden – who is actually God's chosen agent to bring God's peace on earth.

We then turn to **John's** quite different take on the Christmas story. No shepherds or angels here.

No Mary or Joseph or Jesus in the manger.

Rather than telling the story **from below**, as it were, from Mary and Joseph's earthly perspective, John invites us to zoom right back from the baby in the manger and see the story **from above**, from a **heavenly** perspective.

This requires a shift in focus that we find challenging, as John presents not so much a special **human** baby but rather **God's very self** coming in human form.



For most of John's overture, Jesus is not mentioned by name.

He is rather the **Word**, equal with God, a part of God and active agent in the creation of the world.

He is the source of **life** and **light**, who not only brought everything in creation into being but who brings **God's** light – God's perspective – on how we are to live. This light shines in the darkness and the darkness – including the terrible and traumatic happenings in the world this year – cannot extinguish the light.

Further, this Word, this light, this expression of God, **took on human flesh** in the form of Jesus and lived our human life, bringing **grace** and **truth** and at the same time making God known. We call this the





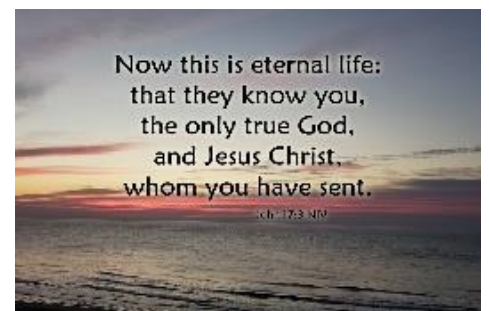
**incarnation** and it remains a source of mystery and wonder for many and a great stumbling block to others ...

But just as Luke's Christmas story acts something like an **overture** to a piece of music, so also John's origin story about Jesus also introduces key themes and motifs for his take on the Jesus story.

The first chord that John strikes is the intimate relationship between **Jesus** and **God**, which is a dominant theme in this Gospel. What is distinctive in John is that Jesus not only reflects God's character but is an expression of God's **very self**. So later in John's Gospel, Jesus will claim that he and the Father are **one**, and that he only does what the Father does, and whoever has seen him has seen the Father ... all claims which make us ponder just who we see lying in the manger at Christmas ...

Jesus carries God's **life** into the world and brings life, spiritual life, **eternal life** to people. This life is all about knowing God and being born of God, becoming children of God, which is an invitation to know God and experience God in a similar way to Jesus.

This is the **grace** or **favour** that Jesus brings.



We're told that Jesus also carries **truth** into the world, truth of who he is in relation to God and how all his words and actions point to this, and truth about the life he offers.



So in John's Christmas story, the veil is pulled right back from the human baby Jesus in the manger and we are invited to ponder – however mysterious and mind-boggling we may find it – how **God** is present in and through Jesus, bringing life and light, grace and truth.

As we think back over this year and the darkness that threatens to intrude and engulf us, the Christmas story invites us to remember that God was acting – and is **still acting** – to bring **life** and **light** and **hope** ...

... whether we hope to see new light in the Ukraine conflict, or new hope in the lives of people struggling with paying the bills or joy in our own families and individual lives, the message of Christmas is that God's love and light were born into the world in the coming of Jesus.

We are called to be **Christmas Christians** in a world that often descends into darkness ... but that darkness does not have the final or enduring word. Rather, the **Word**, the creative presence and expression of God with us in the world – who is also the true **Lord** and **Saviour** – who brings light and peace to our hearts, to our community and to the world – this Jesus is coming afresh today – and every day.

And so we pray, be born in us afresh today, O Lord, and come among us to bring your light and life, and your hope, joy and peace.