

What is the significance of the Christmas story for you?

A CHRISTMAS STORY

The Christmas story as told by children ...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-s56Xa_C54I&t=184s

Read: [Isaiah 9:2-3, 6-7](#) [Luke 2:1-20](#)

Christmas Day is here!

... the day when we remember Jesus' birth ... an event that went largely unnoticed at the time. Exactly how it all happened and who was present is less important to the Gospel writers than the fact that it did happen. Luke, Matthew and John each imbue the story with themes that are important for them in the telling of the Christmas story ...

Each of these Gospel writers present the story as **theologically** significant.

God **plans** the birth.

God **orchestrates** the birth.

God **celebrates** the birth.

For **Matthew**, Jesus is **Emmanuel** – **God with us**. (See other recent Messages)

For **John**, Jesus is the **Word of God** taking on human flesh and dwelling amongst us.

While for **Luke**, Jesus is the **Saviour** for humanity who is both Messiah and Lord.

So in thinking about the significance of Jesus' birth for us in Australia in 2019, what do we take from these three accounts and how much of our thinking about this day is culturally conditioned? In our celebrations of Christmas, where is Jesus to be found? **Front** and **centre**, or **off to the side** somewhere or mostly forgotten? How have we domesticated Jesus to meet our comfortable cultural expectations?

This morning I want to focus on and compare Matthew's and Luke's versions of the story.

For Matthew it's clearly important that Jesus is firmly established as belonging to the kingly line of David – and so the legitimate **Messiah** – the hoped for King of Israel. Hence the prominence of Joseph in Matthew's story, as Joseph is descended through

the line of David.

Jesus is also to be thought of as **Emmanuel** – God with us – a sign and symbol of God's **presence** and God's **grace** moving among us. Matthew ends his story on this same note – Jesus promising to be with his followers to the very end of the age – once again the promise of Emmanuel.

But in Matthew this whole story plays out against a backdrop of darkness and danger. Some time after the birth of Jesus, wise men – magi – come looking for Jesus. These outsiders worship Jesus while the reigning Jewish puppet king, Herod, deceives and plots to have Jesus killed. Through God's grace, Jesus and family are rescued from Herod and then later settle in Nazareth, out of sight. The violence and antagonism towards Jesus will return during his ministry as the religious authorities plot to kill him. As the story starts, so it ends. But through it all, God is with us in Jesus.

So from Matthew's story we might learn that Jesus is the promised King and therefore worthy of our allegiance, but perhaps more importantly, we might let the significance of the title **Emmanuel** settle deep into our spirits ... that **God truly is with us always** but especially in times of difficulty and danger. This won't save us from enduring some painful times, but when they come, we can be assured that through Jesus, God is indeed with us.

In Luke's version of the Christmas story, just like for Matthew, the actual birth of Jesus is covered in a short matter-of-fact way – 'Mary gave birth to her firstborn son'. A very **ordinary** human birth – with all the associated pain, mess and danger of childbirth to be assumed by the reader. There are no animals mentioned, no innkeeper, no stable, no star guiding the way – despite each of these elements featuring in our folklore about the Christmas story – as we saw in the video. There is just Mary and Joseph and their son.

What matters more for Luke is first of all placing the event in its historical context as he names the key movers and shakers of the era – who was **Emperor** and who was **Governor** – and how Jesus got to be born in **Bethlehem**, the birthplace of King David.

The other aspect that matters to Luke is how the news of the birth was shared and who responded. This takes up some **12 verses**, indicating that this mattered more to Luke than details of the birth.

The importance of the birth is underlined by the angelic announcement – highlighting **God's perspective**, the highest authority in the narrative – a higher authority than even Caesar. The angelic announcement is filled with promise and possibility – ‘to you is born this day **in the city of David** a **Saviour**, who is the **Messiah**, the **Lord**’. This is clearly no ordinary child!

Born in Bethlehem – the birthplace of Israel's greatest king – David – Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. More than this, Jesus will also be a **Saviour**, and thus a rival not only to King Herod but also to **Caesar**, who also claimed the title of Saviour along with the related claim that Rome, through Caesar Augustus, had brought **peace** to the entire world.

So the angelic choir singing about God bringing peace on earth is deeply subversive. Jesus will of course be a very different sort of Saviour, bringing peace through compassion and love rather than through violence or economic oppression – and ultimately giving up his life to save others.

For Luke it's significant that those on the margins hear this message. So the news is not announced to the movers and shakers but to a **group of shepherds (slide)**, forgotten people who live – literally – on the margins of society – perhaps with the status of cleaners or farm labourers today. Yet in God's wisdom, these are the first people to learn the news. They are the **common** people among whom Jesus will live and minister. They may be **nobodies** in the world's eyes, but they are exactly the sort of people that Jesus cared deeply about. So it seems fitting that this extraordinary new king and saviour should first be revealed to those considered outsiders and beyond God's care.

How the shepherds respond is instructive. They go and check out the news for themselves and then **share the news with others** and return home **rejoicing** and **praising God** ... so in Luke's eyes, they are early disciples. They have grasped that this child will bring God's message of peace to everyone and this is a message to share and rejoice about.

So from Luke's story we might learn that Jesus – not Caesar – is to be the true **Saviour** of the world – and that this message is for everyone. It's a message of joy and it's a message to be shared.

A thought, then, to ponder for today is the significance **we** place on the baby Jesus – both this day and every day. Will we keep him there in the manger – safe, cute, and easily forgotten until next Christmas – or will we allow the gift of God’s presence – that flows through Jesus – to impact and transform our thinking and our actions – knowing that Jesus is **Emmanuel** – God with us – in every situation we face?

Amen.