

# The Way in a Manger

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] I'm one of the pastors here, and I would like to add my welcome today as well to Doncaster Carols. If this is your first time, then please do come and say hi to me afterwards. I hope you've been enjoying the carols.

In fact, the carol we just sung is actually a very controversial inclusion. You might think, oh, we're in the manger, why, why? Because in the second verse, there's actually a line which says, the little Jesus, no crying he makes.

And there are actually a lot of Christians that object to that particular line because actually in the Bible, there is no talk of no crying. And in fact, Jesus probably did cry.

But the reason why we sang it was because the title of tonight's talk is The Way in the Manger. And so we had to sing Away in the Manger just so that I could get my title in. Anyway, it's a popular carol.

And talking about popularity, let me start by asking you a question. Who here has heard of The Mailway? Anyone? Yeah, most people. Some of the younger ones have sort of given.

[ 1 : 0 8 ] No, no. Keep your hands up maybe. Put up your hands or keep it up if you have actually owned a copy of it. Not bad. And who still has one in the back of their car?

Oh, not bad. Now, many of you would know the Mailway was the street directory before GPS. And it was actually one of the most popular selling item in a bookstore.

Because as can be seen by the hands up in the air, everyone needed one in their car. And for those of you who are too young to know, here's a cover of the 1990 version.

Who's got that version, by the way? I've got the 1992, I think. I tried to look for it. I think it's missing its front cover, but I couldn't find it at home. And nowadays, of course, with GPS and Google Maps, no one really buys the Mailway anymore, even though they keep printing new copies each year.

There you go. I actually saw one at the RACV shop the other day. I'm not sure how many copies they actually sell, but there you go. Now, I have to confess that I do miss the Mailway. Because there was a certain satisfaction that came with trying to find your way around Melbourne.

[ 2 : 2 0 ] Unlike today, where you just blindly hear that GPS female voice telling you to turn right at the next left or whatever. Back in those days, you actually got to work out how best to get from A to B.

And as a result of that, you actually had a better sense of where you were going. So that if, for example, there was a traffic jam, you knew, ah, here's a diversionary route I could take, or here's a shortcut.

So I kind of miss the Mailway, but I know, you know, I have to use the GPS nowadays because I've been told to by the lady in the voice. But whether you're like me, a Mailway man or a GPS fan, all of us need some sort of guide, don't we?

When we are trying to find our way on a journey. And that's true in life as well. So if you're deciding on a certain career, for example, we look to mentors to show us the way, how to make a success of our chosen career path.

Or if you start working a new job, we hope that someone will show us the ropes, help us to get around, to get ahead in the workplace. And if you go to the bookstores nowadays, they are full of how-to or self-help books, aren't they?

[ 3 : 41 ] Teaching us all sorts of things, from getting ahead on the share market, to achieving our ideal body weight and shape, to finding happiness and fulfillment in life.

Whatever directions you need, it seems that someone has already written a book on it. And many people see religion this way too, as ways by which we can find God or find the blessed life.

In fact, if you're familiar with the Chinese, there's a Chinese religion or sort of way of living called Taoism.

And the word Tao in Chinese actually literally means the way. So people think each religion teaches its adherence how to get to God.

What must they do to be good enough? How are they to live to achieve the standard that's required? And some of you here today may see Christianity like that too.

[ 4 : 47 ] The Bible, from which we read, is the book for Christians to learn how to get to God. And perhaps looking at my title tonight, The Way in the Major, you may be thinking that that's what I'm going to be talking about tonight.

How to get to God the Christian way. How to be a good Christian. But I wonder whether, as you were listening to those readings tonight, whether you picked up on the surprising thing that the Bible talks when it comes to the way.

So yes, it's true that in both our first and second readings, there is talk about the way. But did you realize whose way they were talking about? Well, look with me again at the passage from Isaiah 40.

In this part of the book of Isaiah, Israel had been punished for her rebellion against God. And as part of that punishment, they had been sent away to exile, to Babylon to be precise.

And the result is the capital of Jerusalem lay neglected and defenseless. So now God speaks comfort to his people in that city. He tells them that their time of suffering is near the end.

[ 5 : 58 ] Their time of punishment is nearly over. And then in verse 3, we hear a voice calling out with these words that are on the slide. In the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord.

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up. Every mountain and hill made low. The rough ground shall become level.

The rugged places are plain. Did you pick up on that? Surprise, surprise. God tells his people that they don't have to find their way back to him.

Instead, God is coming to them. The way is actually God's way. God is going to find them to restore his relationship with them.

Now, that's not how it normally works, is it? I don't know about you, but if ever I did wrong, then I know that I'm the one that's required to make amends, to set things right.

[ 7 : 00 ] Perhaps buy that bunch of flowers. Write the card of apology. And go gently to my wife and plead forgiveness from her.

And yet, here we read, God is the one who is coming to Israel. Now, many of you would remember in July, that amazing rescue of that boy's soccer team, right?

In Thailand, trapped in the caves. A picture of them, that was the enduring picture that I had in my mind. Somehow or other, they and their coach had managed to wander deep into a series of caves, only to be trapped when the caves became flooded with rain.

It took rescuers more than a week to locate them. And then when they found them, they found that they were too weak, and the route out too difficult, that what they had to do was to sedate them, put them on little stretches, or bigger stretches, and carry them out with the divers swimming with them, with the oxygen mask over their faces.

And tragically, one of the Thai Navy SEAL divers actually died as a result. But amazingly, everyone else came out alive. But what the boys and the coach realized very early on, even when they were found, was that literally, they were helpless to save themselves.

[ 8 : 33 ] Firstly, they couldn't even signal where their location was. The caves were too deep for the GPS signal to work. And so they actually had to wait for the divers to find them.

Then when they were found, they were actually too weak. To actually follow the divers out on their own strength. No, every step of the way, every step of the rescue, the boys were actually helpless, even though they were young and they were able-bodied.

And this is the same with Israel. God knew that they were unable to save themselves. That's why He knew that He had to come to save them. Now, many of us are familiar with that third reading tonight, from chapter 2 of Luke.

It's the story of Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem because the emperor had instructed for a census to be taken. And we know that when they got there, Jesus had to be born in an inn because there was no room anywhere else.

But in Luke's gospel, this account is actually preceded by our second reading tonight. It's the song or prophecy of Zechariah, which Sandra read.

[ 9 : 45 ] Zechariah was a priest, but he was also the father of John the Baptist. And his song spoke of what God was doing at the time and the role his son will play. And again, listen to this song and notice how he pays tribute to God's role in saving Israel.

Most of the song is actually about God, about God as the Savior. So he says, Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he said through his holy prophets of long ago, one of which was Isaiah from our first reading.

Salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham, to rescue us from the hand of our enemies and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

It's all about God up to this point, isn't it? God had to come to rescue them. They are helpless otherwise. Now, realize of course that Zechariah was prophesying at a time when Israel was being occupied by the Roman Empire.

[ 11 : 08 ] And so you might think that these enemies that Zechariah is referring to were the Romans. And in a sense, yes, of course, Israel wanted to be free from their rule. But it's what Zechariah says next that shows us where the real problem for Israel lies.

For Zechariah knew that the role his son would play would be that of a forerunner and messenger. And so he says, And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High.

For you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercy of our God by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

So you see that phrase there again, to prepare the way for the Lord. That's a direct reference to Isaiah 40. And again, it's talking about the way of God coming to us rather than the other way around.

And when Isaiah, in chapter 40 of Isaiah, talks about making straight the paths and making mountains low and the valleys high, what does Zechariah say here?

[ 12 : 29 ] He talks about giving the people a knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins. In other words, John prepares the way of the Lord by calling people to repent, to draw attention to their sins, which is what they need rescuing from.

And so the enemies are not mere humans, but sin, evil, and death. And God's coming in Jesus is like that of a rising sun driving out the moral darkness in our lives.

It's always tempting, isn't it, to blame others for our problems? You often do that. When we were young, perhaps it was our parents who make our lives miserable.

Then when we're older, it's our friends who betray us or our boss at work or the company we work for. And then maybe it's the government, you know. We didn't vote for that party that got back into government.

They're the ones making our lives a misery. If only they would reduce taxes or provide more services or both. But it's often hard to look at ourselves, isn't it, and to say honestly, no, we're the problem.

[ 13 : 50 ] We're the ones that are the cause of the conflict. We are the ones that have been selfish. We are the ones that are never satisfied. Instead, we think, oh, no, we can solve the problem by changing things that are external to us.

We go around looking for a better life or a better job or better friends or a better boyfriend or wife or family. But you know what?

If you've asked the most successful people in this world, the richest people, they'll be the first to tell you that actually these things don't make a difference. So take the story of this man, Philip Ng.

He and his brother are one of the richest men in Singapore. Their family wealth is estimated at more than \$10 billion. Most of you have seen the show Crazy Rich Asians.

Yeah? Yeah, they probably fit right into that scene. Now, their father was the one who started a real estate empire. Actually, the father was at one time dubbed King of Orchard Road.

[ 14 : 51 ] If you know Orchard Road, it's like Bourke Street Mall except much longer. But this is what Philip shared about his life. And I'll put it on the slide. He said, I was always in search of a better life, a better purpose, a better me, a better everything.

Now, mind you, this was a guy who had billions of dollars, lots of whatever he wanted. And yet, it was always something better that he was looking for. And then he realized, I was just looking at all the wrong things.

It's crazy, isn't it? He had everything, and yet, he wasn't satisfied. And that's when, in the year 2000, he realized he was the problem and that what he needed was Jesus.

And so he goes on by saying, what I have discovered is that all of us are broken. We all have a missing piece. For me, I discovered that the missing piece was God through Jesus Christ.

Christmas is supposed to be a joyous time. At least that's what everyone seems to tell us to do. All the TV ads seem to suggest it. And that's what we wish for one another.

[ 16 : 03 ] But it's also a time of great sadness and regret, isn't it? Another year is nearly over. And what have we achieved, really? The problems we started the year with, well, most of them are not resolved.

And maybe we've even added to them in the meantime. The people that we want to reconcile with, well, we're still not on talking terms with them. The dreams that we had at the start remain unfulfilled.

And those flaws that we keep wanting to improve on, that we make New Year resolutions about, well, they're still there. Philip is right, isn't he?

We're all broken. We're just like those boys in the caves, those Thai boys. We can't even get out of our own mess let alone find our way to God.

That's why God has to come to us to rescue us. That's why God sent his son Jesus. He has to make his way to us because we can't make our way to him.

[ 17 : 12 ] But here's the real final surprise about the Christian story. Because you see, God being who he is, he could have sent his son to be born in the richest family in the land, you know, maybe make him the son of King Herod or something.

And yet, God chose a humble virgin in Mary. And she wasn't even allowed to give birth in her own home, but in an inn far away.

As the carol we sung earlier said, away in a manger, no crib for a bed. But lest you despise the circumstances of Jesus' birth, the angels who appeared to the shepherds announced Jesus in this way.

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 Savior has been born to you. He's the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Yes, it may be a humble birth, but Jesus is still the King, the Messiah.

[ 18 : 22 ] He's still the Lord and Savior of the world. But He comes in this fashion, in this humble fashion, to show us that actually He's come for all people.

Not just the rich and powerful, but for the weak and the poor. In fact, especially for the weak and the poor, for those who realize that they are helpless without God.

He has come for you if that's how you feel about your life. When the prophet said that we are to make straight our paths, God is not saying that we have to get our lives in order before God will accept us.

No. We don't have to be perfect or morally better in order for God to receive us. No. We make straight our paths, as I said earlier, by humbling ourselves.

Repentance is the Christian word for it. To realize and admit that no, we can't save ourselves. And actually to put aside our pride and that pretense that yes, if we try harder or we just be something better, then we will be good enough for God.

[ 19 : 29 ] No. To make straight our paths simply means to be humble enough to receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior with open arms. And why is it that God wants us to receive Jesus and Jesus and Jesus alone?

Why is it, as Philip says, that the missing piece is Jesus Christ our Lord? Because this baby will grow up to pay the price for our brokenness, our sin.

He will be the one who died on the cross for us. And our acknowledgement of Him as Lord and Savior is acceptance of what He's done for us on the cross. that we accept His death as the penalty that God requires for our brokenness and our sin.

And that through Him we can then have the gift of eternal life. But the first step, if you haven't done that tonight, is to recognize that we need Him as our Savior because we realize we can't do it ourselves.

We can't make our way to God. Or to a better life. Or to everlasting life. Now maybe for some of you here tonight, you may still have questions about Jesus.

[ 20 : 42 ] So if that's the case, then please let us help you answer some of them. Come to me and talk afterwards while we're having food and conversation outside. Or better yet, why don't you come back?

Accept my invitation to come back next Sunday or the Sunday after that because every Sunday that's what we do here. We spend time understanding how the Bible speaks to the deepest needs in our lives.

And then we also have smaller groups during the week that talk a bit more in depth about it as well. So if that's you, why don't you bring your questions to us? Why don't you bring your questions to God as you read the Bible?

Well, let me finish by saying that what the angels announced to shepherds is right. whatever your situation in life is, God has good news of great joy for you.

You don't have to find your way to God. God has already found His way to you. And that way is found in the manger, in the gift of His Son, Jesus, born of Mary, in the city of David, as the Savior and Lord of the world.

[ 21 : 54 ] The only thing we need to do is to reach out humbly to God and receive Him in our lives. And so, if you have not done that today as yet, then please take this opportunity and accept this great gift from God.