

The Reason We Celebrate

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 December 2023

Preacher: Mark Chew

- [0 : 0 0] Well, let me add my welcome as well to Jess. My name is Mark. It's great to see so many new faces here today. And it's great that you can come and join us for our carol service.
- It was also good to hear reasons for people's celebration this year. Births over there somewhere. Marriages, engagements, passing subjects, winning.
- What was that again? Fortnight. I'm not sure what that is all about. But it must be worth celebrating. All these are occasions that bring joy to our lives. It also gives us the sense that life is good.
- The event's well worth celebrating. However, as Jeff has said at the start as well, we seem also to be living at a time when events in the world give us less cause to celebrate.
- Firstly, the wars. The one in Ukraine doesn't appear to be ending any time soon. And of course, every day the attention now is on Gaza. And we see the despair in the eyes of the Palestinian children as well as on the faces of the hostage families in Israel.
- [1 : 1 2] Or closer to home, there are threats over summer. The heat, the bushfires, the floods, the cyclones, and other natural disasters.
- Plus, this year, I don't know about you, but I feel like the shopping centers are a bit less festive. A few people I see with all these bags that are overflowing with shopping.
- Maybe they spent all their money on Black Friday. Or maybe it's all going to happen next week in a rush. Particularly when there's all this talk in the media of cost of living pressures, it seems to put a dampener on celebration.
- Which brings us to the question, why do we celebrate Christmas? Yes, we all know it's the birthday of Jesus. But you know what? He was born 2,000 more years ago now.
- Why continue to celebrate his birth? Now, it's true that over time, there are many traditions that have attached themselves to Christmas. And nowadays, many just see it as another opportunity, perhaps, to get together with family and friends.
- [2 : 2 1] To have a party at the end of the year. Well, that's fair enough, I suppose. But what about the original reason for Christmas? Is it worth celebrating Christmas still because of Jesus?
- Well, in our first reading today, we are given some good reasons, aren't we? It says, for example, on the next slide, verse 6 of Isaiah 9, For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.
- And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end.
- He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.
- Now, if you were here with us last week, we spent some time looking at these words already. We considered the names that this child, whom we know as Jesus, will be called.

[3 : 25] Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. But tonight, it's the next sentence that I'm most interested in, which says, Of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end.

Now, surely this promise and prediction is true, then it's worth celebrating. Given all that we've seen in the world, to have a king who reigns forever, a forever king, maintaining peace across his realm, that would be a fantastic reality, wouldn't it?

Now, as if to reinforce this, at the time of Jesus' birth, this promise of peace is repeated and reinforced. And again, if you were here last Sunday, you'd recall that John the Baptist's father, Zechariah prophesied that Jesus, when he comes, will, next slide, shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet into the path of peace.

Now, then, of course, in the account tonight, when the angel appeared to the shepherds outside Bethlehem, this is what we read. 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. Celebration. Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you.

[4 : 50] 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. And then suddenly, a great company of heaven appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace to those on whom his favor rests.

And so at the coming of Jesus the Savior, there's the promise of peace on earth, isn't there? Well, that was more than 2,000 years ago. But today, the prospect of peace still remains as elusive as ever.

Not just in the wars around us in the world, but even here in the relative peace of our country, in Australia. We appear to be divided over so many things, aren't we?

Not just 40 teams. I'm not talking about that. But for example, the referendum on The Voice, 6040. The marriage plebiscite, which was a few years ago, 6333.

6333. The current war in Gaza, where we see protests one day for one side, and then the next day, another demonstration for the other side. Now, thankfully in Australia, we don't resort to violence.

[6 : 08] But we still argue, don't we? And fight with words, with laws. So if Jesus was the Savior that was supposed to bring peace, then why do we still celebrate his birth, where there appears no evidence of this peace?

Well, because we need to first understand exactly what this peace that Jesus promises to bring is all about. You see, many of us focus firstly on the peace that's horizontal between humans.

But actually, if the Bible talks about this, the peace that needs to be first achieved is that which is vertical between us and God. And we get a clue of this with what the promise is all about, isn't it?

Because remember what the great company of heavenly angels were singing. They said, Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace. But did you notice, peace to whom?

Everyone in the world? Well, not quite, is it? But peace to those on whom his, that is God's favor, rests.

[7 : 24] The promise of peace is with those whom God favors. Now, interestingly, we find that such a person in Luke, one such person is actually Jesus' mother, Mary.

So much so that when the angel first appears to her, he says to her on the next slide, verse 28 of chapter 1, Greetings, you who are highly favored.

That word favor there. The Lord is with you. Now, of course, a little further on, we find Mary's own reflection, her song on why she's found this favor. And so if you haven't done so yet, let me encourage you to actually read the first few chapters of Luke.

Because it's actually fascinating how this idea of the Lord's favor weaves its way through this Christmas story. Anyway, as I said, Mary writes a song to explain this favor, or to use her own words, why she's blessed by the Lord.

And it boils down for her to humility. For she says that God's favor is upon those who humble themselves. So, she says in verse 46 on the next slide, My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

[8 : 47] From now on, all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is his name. Now, I suspect that many today struggle with this idea that God favors some and not others.

We don't like it, do we, when people play favorites in life. You know, when your boss does it, you know, or your teacher does it. We don't like it. We don't think it's fair.

So, why is it okay then for God to do the same? Well, I have to say that what God does is actually fair, even though he favors.

You see, what we've done is all turn our backs against God, such that actually no one deserves God's favor. That is, no one deserves to be in right relationship with him.

So, our true status lies not in what God hasn't done, but rather what we haven't done. We chose not to submit to God.

[9 : 50] We chose not to accept his rule over us. We want to walk our own way. We want our independence, which is away from him. So, it's not that God has rejected us, but that we actually have rejected him.

And perhaps we've not even done that deliberately. But we've done it by simply exerting our independence. And yet, God provides a way for us to turn this around, to come back to him.

And so, it's absolutely fair, because he makes it available to all. Anyone, everyone can do it, regardless of your race, sex, marital status, age, or ability.

This is the peace that is promised with Jesus' coming, a chance to make peace with God by restoring our relationship with him, so that we're no longer at war with him, but rather, we live the life that he created for us to live.

Now, that's not to say that this life is going to be easy, we choose it that way, but we find peace in choosing to do, choosing to live this way. Now, many of you will know this, of course, that sometimes in life, we don't choose what's easy, do we?

[11 : 12] But sometimes, we decide that we want to do the right thing, even though it's difficult. Maybe we're driven by a passion in life, by a cause, we want to rise up to a challenge or something.

We know it's not easy, and yet, deep down, when we decide we want to do it, there is a sense of joy in pursuing it, isn't there? Because we know that what we're doing is what we need to do.

And that's the same with living for God. It's not always easy, not always something we fully understand, but deep down, you do it, we do it, because we're meant to.

And here in Mary's song, she explains how to find favor with God, and to be blessed by Him. How does it happen? Well, she attributes God's favor to her humble state as His servant.

And elsewhere in these chapters, you will find that humility is also described as being repentant. And God's favor comes in finding forgiveness for what we've done wrong.

[12 : 14] Now, I'm sure many of you have been in a conflict before, and I don't know about you, but we all remember how that feels when we're in conflict, isn't it? There's a lot of stress that goes with being in conflict.

Often, we don't sleep well. You know, our heart rate and our blood pressure goes up. Physically, we can feel our muscles tense up and our stomach churning. And then when the conflict is finally resolved, how do we feel then?

There's an overwhelming sense of relief, isn't it? You know, a weight, literally you can feel it taken off your shoulders. There's that sense of deep peace in your body when that happens, isn't it?

Now, imagine if that's the feeling you get, finding peace with just another human being. What peace with God, the one who created this universe, the one who created you and knows you intimately, how profound that peace would be when you find it.

More profound than finding peace if you've been quarrying with your parents or family members. This is the peace that comes when you know that all the wrongs in your life have been forgiven by God.

[13 : 32] That's what it means to be at peace with God, our Heavenly Father. Now, in some religions, there's this quest, isn't there, to be one with the universe.

Or maybe I'm just mistaking this for Star Wars, I don't know. Being one with the Force or something. Well, for Christians, the answer lies, actually, with being at peace with God.

Not at peace with the universe, firstly, but at peace with the one who created the universe. And there's an overwhelming joy that comes in knowing that you've been reconciled with the creator of the cosmos.

And all this is possible because of Jesus. That's why we celebrate Christmas, because his birth is that decisive moment in history that makes peace with God possible.

Jesus, who is God's Son, comes from heaven so that Jesus became a man, and becomes a man, to ultimately die on the cross for humanity. And that's the song we sang with what child is this, who bears our sin, who has nails pierced on the cross.

[14 : 39] And it's his death that makes this peace, forgiveness, possible. Because that's the price of peace with God. Jesus took the penalty so that we don't have to do it.

And we are forgiven instead through faith in Jesus. And as a consequence, restore our relationship with God. And so, my friends, if you have not found peace with God, and there is a deep longing in you to do that, even if up to now you can't quite understand how, then let me urge you to find favor with God through his son Jesus.

Humble yourself, that's what Mary says, by coming to God in repentance and trusting Jesus to save you by what he's done on the cross. Take this invitation that God has given to us seriously and accept this generous offer.

Come and find peace with God. And then celebrate the real reason for Christmas, the true joy and peace that Jesus offers. Now, some of you then may ask, well, if Jesus is all he says he is, then we have peace.

Why is the world like this? Why is there still wars and conflict? If he's really the prince of peace, then where are the signs of peace that he ought to be bringing? Well, to begin with, reality of war in this world isn't because Jesus isn't the prince of peace.

[16 : 02] But rather, there is war and conflict today because there are still many people that don't submit to his rule. You see, his peace is only available when we submit to his rule.

It's a benefit that we can only experience when people submit to him. Because his is a kingdom of love, he does not force us or compel us to recognize him as the rightful ruler now.

Rather, he wants people to embrace him willingly and submit to him joyfully. And so all these wars that are still in the world, well, it's not really Jesus' fault.

Rather, it's the result of human rebellion, of people choosing not to be under Jesus' rule. Now, of course, even as Christians, we can be guilty of this, can't we?

And so sometimes in the church, sadly, there is still conflict because even those who call themselves Christians fail to live perfectly under Jesus' rule. And so, as Christians, Christmas is actually a good time for us to recommit to obeying Jesus.

[17 : 14] Now, we ought to do this all the time, of course, but if there is conflict in your life at the moment, and you are a follower of Jesus, then perhaps now at Christmas, now is the opportunity to make peace with those you have fallen out with.

Then we can truly celebrate, can't we, the reason for Christmas. We can rejoice in Jesus, the Prince of Peace, our Prince of Peace, who came so that those who have found favor in God's sight can be forgiven of their sins, have their relationship with God restored, and live at peace with the world.

Well, let's continue to celebrate this truth by singing our next carol, *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*. Please write as we sing.