



Sermon

The Christmas Tree

Christmas 2013

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It was a deep, dark, starry night in Bethlehem long ago. The bustle of traders and hawkers had stopped. The trotting of hooves and jingle of Roman harness had ceased. Sweaty bodies had eased thankfully in between mattress and covers. The occasional insect buzzed fitfully. Tonight was the night - the ancient longing of the patriarchs and prophets was about to be fulfilled. The census may have attracted all the attention but it was not the truly important event.

In the year 1809, the international scene was tumultuous. Napoleon was sweeping through Austria; blood was flowing freely. Nobody then cared about babies. But the world was overlooking some very significant births.

For example, William Gladstone was born that year. He was to become one of England's great prime ministers. Alfred Tennyson, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Edgar Allan Poe were all born in that year. So too, a physician called Darwin and his wife named their child Charles Robert; while a rugged log cabin in Kentucky was the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln.

Had there been news broadcasts at that time, people might have heard: "The destiny of the world is being shaped on an Austrian battlefield today." But history was actually being shaped in the cradles of England and America. Similarly, everyone in Israel thought taxation was the big news--when Jesus was born. But a young Jewish woman cradled the biggest news of all: the birth of the Saviour.¹

The significance of these babies was not apparent when they were born – it was what they would believe, think, say and do as adults which would affect the world so much.

So too, the child born in an over-crowded village to a peasant couple would have attracted no attention of himself. Yes, this was God in a body but he had "...made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."²

It was the heralding of this birth to some shepherds by heavenly messengers and to a few wise men by a notable astronomical sight that caused anyone to know this was the most significant child ever.

It was what Jesus would do that mattered - babies are intended to grow up not remain in a cradle all their lives!

¹ Adapted from Charles Swindoll; Source: <http://www.sermonillustrations.com>

² Philippians 2:7

That passage from Philippians continues: “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”³

What was his purpose? The reading from the Letter to Titus summarises it well:

But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.⁴

Jesus came to save us. Not because we deserved it but because of his mercy.

The Garden of Eden account tells of the origin of man’s rebellion against God. A rebellion which we all play out for ourselves. It is an inherited trait. Parents, when did you teach your child to say, “No!”?

Yes, we all make repeated, similar choices to disobey and rebel against God’s good ways. And as God is the source of life, to cut oneself off from the source of life is to face death. If you stop eating altogether, you will die – not immediately but in time. If a diver’s oxygen supply is cut off, he will die rather more quickly.

I do not propose this Christmas to explore the account of Adam and Eve with all the nuances and depths of the story, let alone the debate that surrounds it. Rather, let us acknowledge that we are all sinners.

St Paul wrote, “... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”⁵ In the first letter of John, it is written, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” And, “If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.”⁶

I want to tell you about one of the origins of the Christmas Tree. In the Middle Ages, Mystery plays were performed which portrayed Biblical stories to the people. It was the custom to act out the garden of Eden story on December 24th since it was name day of Adam and Eve in many countries.

In the play, there was a Paradise Tree which is an origin of our modern Christmas tree. In the 15th centuries people in Germany started to put a Paradise Tree in their homes at Christmas time.

In that Mystery play, they represented the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil by hanging apples on a tree. The apple is traditionally thought to be the fruit Eve then Adam ate although the Bible does not give any such suggestion. Why might they have thought that? I wonder if it is because of the name. In Latin, the language of the Church in the Middle Ages, the word for apple is *malus*. It is still used as the botanical name for the genus, eg., *malus domestica*. The word *malum* in Latin means bad or evil. And the way Latin nouns work in many uses of the words, they would sound exactly the same. In Latin, one would hear the Tree of the knowledge of good and apple/evil. It was an obvious association to make.

So in the Mystery play, they represented the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil by hanging apples on a tree. In time, they started to make permanent apples, carved from wood, which were hung on the tree. Later still, the apples were replaced with coloured balls. What colours do apples come in? Red, green and yellow. So we came to have coloured balls as decorations on our trees intended to remind us of the fruit of the tree.

But that only represents the problem. It reminds them that we are sinners. There was another named tree in the Garden of Eden; it was the Tree of Life.

In Revelation, telling if you will, the end of the Bible story, we also read of the Tree of Life:

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.⁷

Jesus himself said, “I am the Life.”⁸ He said,

³ Phil 2:8

⁴ Titus 3:4-7

⁵ Romans 3:23

⁶ 1 John 1:8, 10

⁷ Revelation 2:7

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."⁹

In the Mystery play when they wanted to represent the Tree of Life, what symbol might they use? They chose the communion wafer as representing the Bread of Life; representing Jesus; representing Eternal Life – the fruit of the Tree of Life.

So they hung communion wafers on the Paradise Tree. As the generations went by, the flat wafers became first biscuits in various shapes and then permanent decorations, typically flat, round shapes. So our medallions on Christmas trees are derived from the communion wafer. They are intended to remind us that it is in Jesus Christ alone that we find eternal life.

Jesus saved us from the consequence of our sin by dying on another tree – the Cross of Calvary. As his life poured out in our place, he dealt with all the consequences of our disobedience and rebellion against God. As the Epistle reading told us,

[God] "saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."

It is when we come to God and humbly ask him to forgive us for our sin because Jesus has paid that price of his life, when we trust that his sacrifice is sufficient and choose to follow him as our Lord and Saviour, then we are washed and cleansed from our sin and guilt. Then we are given new life and enter into eternal life.

When you look at the Christmas tree, look past the tinsel and the glitter and remember the story of our need for forgiveness and the salvation in Jesus which is represented there – if you just have eyes to see it.

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⁸ John 14:6

⁹ John 6:51