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Sermon

Redemption told by the Christmas Tree

Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

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It is Christmas – the celebration of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. We have just heard the account Luke gives us of that birth. Luke asserts that he has been particularly careful with the sources of his information as he has consulted eyewitnesses and set out to produce an orderly account. In the introduction to his account, he writes:

Luke 1:1-4 Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. ³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Now the importance of a baby's birth lies in the potential of that human – in what he or she does later in life. What are we told immediately about this baby? Luke who has consulted eye-witnesses says the shepherds heard an announcement from angels. They said, "Today in the town of David a **Saviour** has been born to you; he is Christ the **Lord**."

This child is called the Christ (meaning the anointed one – or in Hebrew the Messiah). The messiah was the promised future king who would be a descendent of King David. He would bring a reign of righteousness. It was prophesied that the messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the town of David. That is where Jesus was born, – which is again significant to mark him as a possible descendent of David.

He is given the titles of Saviour and Lord.

What is the significance of this birth we celebrate? It is that the man Jesus, the promised righteous King would be both Lord and Saviour. My question to you is – do you know him as Saviour and Lord?

I have mentioned the idea that this birth was predicted by Jewish prophets. We have heard a portion of Isaiah's words. Isaiah lived about 700 years before this birth. In his writings, there are many, many prophecies of the Messiah which were fulfilled in the life of Jesus.

Today we heard of a child whose birth would be metaphorically like a sunrise to the people. This one would be a great light. (Jesus of course called himself the Light of the World.) Isaiah goes on to say that this child

would be a great ruler, counsellor and source of peace. His would be rule of righteousness and justice and it would ever increase.

He would be a descendent of David, but not just a human descendent because he is called the Mighty God – which no Jew could apply to a mere human – that would be the height of blasphemy.

In summary, Isaiah tells of a child who would be **Righteous LORD! Prince of Peace! Mighty God!**

My question to you is do you know him as **Righteous LORD! Prince of Peace! Mighty God!**

Isaiah said the Messiah would be a ruler – the Lord. But the angels said he was also to be Saviour.

I want to tell you something of the symbolism of the Christmas tree. Typically people think it has nothing to do with Christ. They have made the assumption that it is of pagan origin but in fact there is a Christian origin for the custom of decorating a tree at Christmas.

In the Middle Ages, Mystery plays were performed which conveyed Biblical stories to the common people. It was the custom to act out the garden of Eden story on Christmas Eve because it was the name day of Adam and Eve. 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 say so. 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 evil/apple. It was an obvious association to make.

Thus 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 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.¹

Jesus himself said, "I am the Life."² He said,

"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."³

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.

On Christmas Eve, a tree was decorated with apples and wafers to tell the story of the fall and redemption of mankind. In the 15th century, people in Germany started to bring a Paradise Tree in their homes at Christmas time and that became the modern Christmas tree.

¹ Revelation 2:7

² John 14:6

³ John 6:51

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.

In our reading from Paul’s letter to Titus, Paul refers to the first and second comings of Jesus.

When he wrote, “...the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men,”⁴ he is referring to the birth of Jesus. Paul refers to that death of Jesus I just mentioned when he wrote: “Jesus Christ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own...”⁵

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.

In that relationship with Jesus we find we want to live his way – the way of the Righteous Prince of Peace. We will not always get it right, but as we allow him to change us, we will grow more like him...

“...while we wait for the blessed hope--the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ...”⁶ Again we are told Jesus is both God and Saviour.

I read this facebook post this afternoon. I don’t know who the original author was but it seems relevant to this sermon.

When I say that I am a Christian, I am not shouting that I am clean living.
I’m whispering that I was lost but now I’m found and forgiven.

When I say that I am a Christian, I don’t speak of this with pride.
I’m confessing that I stumble and need Christ to be my guide.

When I say that I am a Christian, I’m not trying to be strong.
I’m professing that I’m weak and need his strength to carry on.

When I say that I am a Christian, I’m not bragging of success.
I’m admitting I have failed and need God to clean up my mess.

When I say that I am a Christian, I’m not claiming to be perfect.
My flaws are far too visible, but God believes I am worth it.

When I say that I am a Christian, I still feel the sting of pain.
I have my share of headaches, so I call upon his name.

When I say that I am a Christian, I’m not holier than thou.
I’m just a simple sinner who received God’s good grace, somehow!

The wonder of the birth at Bethlehem was that that child was all these things: Righteous LORD, Saviour, Prince of Peace but also the Mighty God entering his own creation and taking on the body of a man.

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.

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies.

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⁴ Titus 2:11

⁵ Titus 2:13,14

⁶ Titus 2:13