

The "Real Meaning of Christmas"

Contributed by Mick Porter
Saturday, 22 December 2007
Last Updated Wednesday, 26 December 2007

Given that Jesus was likely not born in December, we still celebrate the birth of Christ on the 25th and try to get back to the "real meaning of Christmas". But what is this real meaning of Christmas, and how can the incarnation of Jesus speak to us?

Before we look to Scripture for some answers, what does the culture around us say is the real meaning of Christmas? A search of a news website revealed these answers - see if you can spot the common thread:

I think we've truly forgotten the meaning of Christmas. Spending time with my family who I don't live near means more than any presents ever will.

We've lost the plot. This is not what Christmas is all about. Stop being greedy capitalist pigs and enjoy Christmas with your family and friends. Life isn't about money and greed.

The household budget will only be stretched because people are buying things they cannot afford. Then in the lead up to Christmas they buy expensive things for people who don't need or want the item. Christmas has lost its meaning. It has turned into a competition to see who can spend the most money on the biggest and best presents - with more than a little prompting from advertising - rather than just spending time with family.

But besides all this don't forget the meaning of Christmas - it is a time to give presents to those who are in need.

Just have a swell time to the real meaning of xmas of good will to thy fellow worker.

Time with family, giving gifts, good will to co-workers - apparently that's the "real meaning" of this season. As entrenched as that view is within our culture, I think the quote that most disturbed me was from a Christian journalist whose child sung the wrong words to a famous him at their church service:

Then I heard - really heard - my son's voice as he sang along with his own lyrics, "Oh come, let us adore me. Oh come, let us adore me. Oh come, let us adore me-ee."

...

I sat basking in that gorgeous little moment, realizing the truest meaning of Christmas had revealed itself. It's a message I hope to hold onto year after year. Oh come, let us adore them: our children, our families, our neighbors ... our city ... our individual and collective faiths.

So even sitting in church, someone can conclude that the truest meaning of Christmas is to... adore our children! That

our great comfort comes from our friends and families. That we can exchange materialistic hope for relational hope.

I hope that I'm not the only one who finds this disturbing - I hope that the shift of worship from Jesus to our own children brings great alarm! But I think it also shows how easily even churchgoers can make assumptions about what Christmas means - so next we'll look at some Scripture and probe some of the meaning from a Biblical perspective.

In Isaiah 9:1-7, we have this amazing promise of a child being born - a promise taken up by Luke at the birth of Jesus:

Isaiah 9 (ESV)

1 But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

2 The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shined.

3 You have multiplied the nation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

4 For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

5 For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.

6 For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

What a meaty passage (especially when read in conjunction with the rest of the chapter)! We have this great light shining in a deeply-dark place, wonderful joy, and a lifting of the yoke of oppression. We have this incredible God-man being born, one carrying the full authority of government - an eternal kingdom ruled with justice and righteousness, brought about by God's great zeal.

In light of this passage, I want to probe three questions that will help us think more deeply about the meaning of Christmas:

- To whom has the light shone?
- Why has the light come?
- How does the light speak to us?

Next we will ask to whom has the light shone?

To whom has the light shone?

In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shined.

The people of Galilee indeed lived in a land of great darkness. They had been hammered by the first massive round of attacks by the Assyrians - but they would be the first to receive the ministry of the Messiah. God was using Assyria to profoundly discipline the northern kingdom of Israel; the Galileans stood in the darkest place, recovering from one war and expecting the next.

In every age there have been people like this; the victims of massive oppression and of the arrogance of governments. The second half of Isaiah 9 makes it clear how directly this was all attributable to the leadership of Israel and Judah. God speaks against their "head and tail" - the head was the elders and the tail was the lying prophets. It's all about oppression and arrogance - they devoured one another and were still not filled, and when God's discipline came they refused to be humble and turn to him.

The coming of the Messiah is steeped in both blessing and judgment. Blessing on the oppressed, the used, the ones caught as collateral damage in other people's power struggles; judgment on the arrogant oppressors. It's a promise of a very different kingdom, the reign of a righteous, just King - which is the most wonderful news for some, but a huge affront to the power hungry in this world.

Next, we'll dig a bit deeper into the reason why the light has shone.

Why has the light shone?

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it

with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.

This child, the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, has come to establish and to uphold his kingdom - his restored reign over all of his creation (which is both seen and unseen). He has come to bring "peace" - the shalom that was shattered at the fall - and this is the greatest news to some and, as we said before, a great affront to others. To the worldly kingdoms, the ones who struggle for power, the entry of Jesus is the greatest of threats - because Jesus' power will not be opposed. But to those who are oppressed, the victims, and any who will humble themselves before him, this is the greatest news!

N.T. Wright has said:

The Christmas story, like Isaiah's prophecy, isn't about an escape from the real world of politics and economics, of empires and taxes and bloodthirsty wars. It's about God addressing these problems at last, from within, coming into our world - his world! - and shouldering the burden of authority, coming to deal with the problems of evil, of chaos and violence and oppression in all their horrible forms. And only when we look hard at those promises and come to grips with what they really mean are we able to grasp the real comfort and joy that Christmas does truly provide. Otherwise we are purchasing a spurious private comfort at the inflated cost of allowing the rest of the world to continue in its misery.

This is just so much bigger than "peace" in middle-class living rooms in front of Christmas trees! It's much more vast than appreciating our children! It's so humongously much greater than a season of treating workmates nicely! It's about the overturning of all oppression, the end of all wars, the wiping away of every tear, the end of darkness, the abolition of every injustice. It's about a great redistribution not just of wealth but of opportunity, of happiness, of blessing.

If, like me, you've had years of being taught that "the kingdom" is synonymous with an earthly institution, some bounded set of people, then this passage probably makes very little sense. But when you see that "kingdom" is as much about "reign" as about "realm", that it's all about God ruling over his creation (that was created to bring him glory), then the meaning of the coming of Jesus, the Christmas story, starts to make some sense. As Luke tells us in chapter 2 (ESV):

And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,
"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

There's an old cliché that says that Jesus came to "disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed"; that saying takes on so much weight in light of the Isaiah passage, and increasingly as we come to grips with the entirety of the Gospel according to Luke. In Luke we see Jesus as the incarnated presence of the kingdom of God - the reign of God has broken in to our fallen world, and it brings untold hope to the broken and it clashes head-on with the institution, the empire, the powers that be.

Next, we will consider the application of this Christmas meaning to our lives.

How does the light speak to us?

One of the great traps for us as Christians is to apply such a text to our lives in a positive sense only; that is, to read the message of hope as being directly addressed to us, and to ignore the message of judgment. Particularly at Christmas time, we're probably not too keen to think through anything too confronting.

The news of the coming of the kingdom in the person of Jesus is news of amazing comfort to some, and threatening to others:

- To those whose lives had been torn to shreds by invading Assyrians, news of a new government - one of peace, justice, and righteousness - was the most delightful news possible
- To those enjoying the benefits of power and comfort, news of a government from heaven was a threat - as evidenced by Herod's all-out assault on infant boys at the time of the birth of King Jesus

Likewise in our day, news of the kingdom may not even be perceived as great news - even by Christians:

- To the poor, the oppressed, those in war zones and so on, the news of another government can still be as wonderful a piece of news as it was to the Galileans back in Isaiah's day - but is that an aspect of the gospel that those people are hearing? Are Christians proclaiming the same message as Isaiah, Luke, John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed? Are we letting the broken know that there's another kingdom; one that appeared in the person of Jesus and which will be fully established and maintained into eternity when he returns?
- Likewise, to those of us who live in comfort, the news of another government may be threatening. Why do I need a new government if this one is keeping my interest rates low? How is the news of Christ's kingdom enthralling to me if I'm getting more than my fair share from this fallen kingdom as it stands? If I'm voting for a government who will keep my taxes down, and encourage the "gentrification" of my suburb, how does news of Christ's kingdom where the first are last, the last are first, the poor and handicapped are called in - how does that news speak to me?

We can't shrink back from confronting these kinds of issues at Christmas time, since the incarnation of Jesus forces us to confront them. When we desire to live in the safest suburb we can afford, to protect our children from the broken people around us, to live in houses larger than we need - the incarnation has so much to say to us. God sent his own Son not into safety, but into danger. Jesus did not come in the incarnation into wealth, but into homelessness. The incarnation must be allowed to speak to our lives at Christmas time, and in the incarnation Jesus will always have a lot to say to us!

Christians can be judged very harshly by history - how will history judge us?

- How did history judge Christians in Nazi-era Germany who were silent (at best) and allowed the rise of such an evil regime?
- How did history judge Christians in South Africa prior to the 1990's who were silent (at best) in allowing such atrocious racism?

So how will history judge today's Western Christianity?

- How will the West be judged by history for the wars in the Middle East? As Richard Bauckham has pointed out - this may so easily be perceived as a Christian vs Islam conflict, yet it is so absolutely to do with the culture of capitalism desiring to dominate the world
- How will the West be judged by history for our consumption of resources, particularly as climate change starts to cause more hardship for the poorer people of the world?
- How will the West be judged by history for the ever increasing divide between the wealthy and the poor in the world?
- How will the West be judged by history for our insatiable appetite for entertainment?

In conclusion, at Christmas time we really must let the implications of the incarnation of Jesus speak to us. Jesus came to usher in God's perfect, restored reign as King, but how does the news of that kingdom strike us?

A few related references

For further study around these themes, I recommend these references:

- Last year's Christmas sermon transcript by N.T. Wright
- Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World by Richard Bauckham - a small but weighty book with some very meaningful comments on the mission of the church, particularly post 9/11
- Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism by George Eldon Ladd - a must-read on the Biblical view of the kingdom of God