

## **God Loves You (main content from Worship the Lord of 4<sup>th</sup> January 2015)**

Let us hear the Word of God from the Gospel of St. Matthew 2: 13 – 15: (NIVUK)

“13 When they [the Wise Men] had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’

14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, (15) where he stayed until the death of Herod.” The Word of the Lord – Amen.

“Merry Christmas – God loves you!” Those were the words chosen by a child at our Gun Bay United Church to accompany gifts this Christmas for some other children whom she did not know. Actually, all she knew about them were the age and gender of each. *And* the fact that they had had to leave home with their mothers and seek refuge with and through the Cayman Islands Crisis Centre, because of domestic violence. However, what our little child obviously knew quite clearly was the *reason* we are blessed by the joyful celebration of Christmas each year: “For God loved *the world* so much that *He gave* His one and only Son, so that *everyone who believes in Him* will not perish but have eternal life.” (NLT) God *loves*, God *gave*, God *saves*. Not just those of us safe and snug in our own homes, sure of Christmas gifts, Christmas lunch, loving family, with sufficient for at least our basic needs. No, the whole world, *everyone*. So she knew one thing we could all truthfully say to them, no matter what their circumstances: “God loves you”.

It is so easy to overlook that critical point in either all the merriment of the Christmas celebrations or by the worldly sorrows that can hit us as individuals at Christmas as at any other time of the year. For, in the first case, Christmas-time once again has become dominated in so many respects by the pagan aspects of celebration. Our western world has become more controlled by those who do not believe in God or Christ or at best are agnostic, they can take it or leave it; but no real faith in even a Creator, and therefore unable to sense any need for a Redeemer.

But they know that when Christianity dominated our western cultures, Christmas grew to become a very special time, as people were moved to celebrate as neighbours, family, brothers and sisters in Christ. A *peak time* of *additional* giving to one another, including complete strangers, as they reflected what Christ did and as God did for us all when He came to Earth so we could be reconciled to Him. So the increasingly dominant non-believers do not want to give that up, even if it is for them simply a time for festivity and to cynically increase sales by putting out the Christmas lights earlier every year. Chuckling all their way to the bank at the notion that “God loves you”. Nothing new there. From Old Testament time the unscrupulous thought the same way - even skimming off excess profits from the money changing and the selling right in the Temple!

That was also the situation 2,000 years ago when Simeon was able to declare of the baby Jesus, “I have seen Your *salvation*, which You have prepared for all people. He is a *light* to reveal God to the nations, and He is the glory of Your people Israel. ... This Child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, but he will be a joy to many others. He has been sent as a sign

from God, but many will oppose Him.” St. John, an *eyewitness* to Jesus’ life and ministry, also perceived that radiating *light*, explaining that Christ’s “*life brought light to everyone.*” And that “The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it” or “can never extinguish it”. So there is nothing new in the ridicule of the darkness, which still does not understand the Light because to do so requires venturing beyond the dimmed existence of the mundane and carnal which they complacently love.

For that was Herod’s problem too, even as Simeon and the shepherds, Anna and the Angels, Mary and the Magi saw the light and worshipped God in Christ revealed. Herod could not see the wonder and the greatness. In the darkness created by his scabrous lifestyle and power, restricted though it was by the greater power of Rome, he could not perceive a brighter life, could not understand the potential of Emmanuel, God with us. So he decided to snuff out the Light before, he thought, it had even had a chance to shine.

Consequently, Jesus as a young baby found Himself homeless, seeking refuge in someone else’s home, another country even. This reinforces the truth of which that little child chose to reassure those other children – “God loves you” even in this situation in which you find yourself this Christmas. For in His time on Earth as Christ, he too was a refugee, dependent on others to provide a temporary home for Him. God loves you and knows first-hand exactly what you are going through, for He suffered the same, and so much more, as Jesus, the Christ.

That therefore brings us to the second aspect of what can sometimes separate us from the truth *that God loves us*, even amongst all the Christmas celebrations. Life does not take a holiday. So painful losses and other events do occur at Christmastime as throughout the year. But God in Christ knows all about these sufferings which He took upon Himself and therefore, as Hebrews says in regard to the temptations we face, He is *not unsympathetic* towards us. God could not be. Indeed it was because of God’s great love for us – *all of us* - that He took on human form, from the glory of heaven to the complete dependability of a baby reliant on others for everything.

Then took on not only our sins but also our sufferings; and defeated the greatest of both, death by human on human, so that by His Resurrection we too can *rise triumphant* from anything and have full and eternal life. Therefore, even in painful circumstances if we trust in Christ we can still have that special component of Christmas, *joy*.

*Joy*, even if we are saddened; because we know that God loves us. Love is a wonderful gift, something powerful. Therefore so is grief and our fear for our loved ones when they are under threat. It is not easy but somehow, as David realised in Psalm 34, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; He rescues those whose spirits are crushed.” That is why people have been able to attest to “the peace of God that passes all understanding”. The Rev. Timothy Keller notes that suffering is the main issue many people have in resisting or rejecting God, the concept of a loving, good and just God. However, he says that over the years of his ministry and research, he also discovered that many people *find* God, or are moved *closer* to Him, through affliction and suffering. He points out that by studying the deep pattern of the Bible we come “to see that the great theme of the Bible itself is how God brings *fullness of*

*joy* not just despite but *through* suffering, just as Jesus saved us not in spite of but *because* of what He endured on the cross.” He adds that from the advantage of the New Testament, “In Jesus Christ we see that God actually *experiences* the pain of the fire [of suffering] as we do. He truly is God *with* us, in love and understanding, in our anguish.”

The third point I want us to remember this morning, though, is the role God has reserved for *us* in all of this. The Redemption He did Himself, as only He could do; and the birth of Christ was an integral part of that. And it is *Christ’s* peace that breaks through pain and suffering. But sometimes He uses the trusting words of a little girl as a catalyst to pave the way in the hearts of some others fleeing from their homes. It was God Who saved the baby Jesus because He knew the intent of Herod’s heart. But in this He enlisted Earthly help to accomplish it. The Wise Men who did not return to tell Herod where Jesus could be found. Joseph and Mary who without question or delay got up and fled to Egypt – neither a simple nor pleasant journey. People in Egypt – unidentified and unremembered by us now - who provided a place of refuge, a temporary home for this Jewish family, despite the strained history of Egypt and Israel that continues even now. Some even speculate that the gold and other expensive gifts of the Wise Men were used to pay for the sojourn in Egypt. I can’t comment on that but I do know that when we give to others from the heart the gift can do things we never imagined. God still needs us who ‘live by the Light’, to be obedient and help provide refuge and gifts, to mourn with those who mourn and laugh with those who laugh, celebrate when a new child is brought to ‘the temple’. In general, to be the earthly support to make true His promise to us all: that no matter who else may forsake you, mother, father, spouse, child, God never will. In other words, to carefully and caringly re-present to *the world* the caring love of Jesus Christ, the centre of Christmas and the Lord of the whole year.

Therefore, let us continue to celebrate, not only at Christmas but throughout the year ahead, the simple truth, that we can and must reassure others by word and deed that, “God loves you.”

Amen