

Sermon Christmas Eve 2018

Luke 1:67 – 79

Let me begin by having a look at our Gospel reading.

Zechariah, a Jewish priest, and his wife, Elizabeth, have just been presented with a son, the future John the Baptist.

Elizabeth is actually a cousin of Mary, and both she and her husband are elderly, but that is another story. Zechariah has a great vision for his son and we see this vision spelt out in this passage. He proclaims that he will be a prophet who will prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, and of course, he was absolutely spot on with his vision.

The Jewish people had been waiting for years for the day when the Messiah, God's anointed king, would appear. His coming was foretold by the prophets. Yesterday we heard from Micah, and then there is the prophecy from Isaiah, '*For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. And the government will rest on his shoulders. These will be his royal titles: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*' Isaiah 9:6. These are but two of several prophecies.

So John's role was to prepare the people for this great arrival. And this is just what we have been doing, or should have been doing, for the past few weeks. Of course, we are surrounded by preparations for Christmas. It is impossible to escape the Christmas celebrations (*Snoopy's Christmas*). As consumers we are urged to spend, spend, spend. And in fact, about 30% of all retail sales in the shopping centres take place over the weeks leading up to Christmas and immediately after, if you include Boxing Day sales. We indulge, excessively.

But are we celebrating the fact or the myth? Are we celebrating the fact that the birth of Jesus Christ over two thousand years ago was the beginning of something quite special, the beginning of a new relationship between God and us, his people? Or are we celebrating just because Christmas has been sold to us as a time of extravagance and indulgence? And as we become immersed in this indulgence, we tend to lose sight of why Christmas exists at all. The integrity of Christmas becomes something of a myth. We prefer the myth to the Master. We want a Santa, not a Saviour.

The story is told of a child who was chosen to play the innkeeper in the Christmas nativity, telling Joseph and Mary that there was no room for them at the inn. But on the night of the big event, he stood onstage, looked into the faces of the

audience, froze in fear, then smiled and announced, 'I'm not supposed to do this, but come on in anyway!' The audience broke out in thunderous applause.

That boy got it right. He reflected the real spirit of Christmas. Put it this way, if Jesus himself had been in his position, what would he have done? I don't need to tell you the answer.

If we really want Christmas to mean something, which after all is the original intent of Christmas, then we need to pause and reflect on the fact that Christmas heralds the beginning of a life that changed the world; the beginning of a life that has impacted on millions of lives in a myriad of ways over two thousand years, and continues to do so even today.

And let's make it personal. How does this life affect me?

Where am I in my relationship with Jesus Christ? Perhaps the groundwork has been laid and I need to build on it? Or perhaps I need to breathe new life into it? Or perhaps I haven't really got past first base. Wherever we are, this is as good a time as any to reflect and move forward. Any birth is about new life, new beginnings. The most appropriate way to celebrate this very special birth, is to breathe new life into our relationship with Jesus, to give ourselves over to a life that embraces the love, the example, the way of Jesus Christ.

I want to finish on this note of giving. Christmas, as we are so very aware of, is all about giving. Again, let us be careful we don't allow the hype of the season distract us from the true spirit of giving. What I mean by that is that it is in the giving of ourselves that we manifest the spirit of giving as given to us by Jesus. Let me illustrate with a story.

*In a remote village in Central Africa the word got out among the people of the region that one of the American missionaries that had served this country for many years was about to return to the US to live out the remaining years of her life.*

*The people wanted to honour her for her years of service with a public ceremony. News of the event went to all parts of the county. One very old and very poor man walked to the ceremony over mountainous terrain for four days to bring his gift to the missionary.*

*The gift consisted of two coconuts, but it was all the man had. The missionary recognised the man has having come from the remote village in the mountains. She said to the man, 'Brother, I cannot believe that you would walk so far to present me with this gift'.*

*The man responded, 'Long walk part of gift.'*

In this time of consumerism and indulgence, let us not forget that the true spirit of giving is about the giving of ourselves. I wish you all a very happy and meaningful Christmas.

