

## Christmas is About Salvation!

### Luke 1:67-79

Friends, I must confess that I always find Christmas holiday a little bit confusing. When is the Public Holiday? Because it's not just Boxing day this year, is it? And so when do the sales begin? The sales start on Boxing Day in the city, but not in the suburbs, or have they moved to the suburbs on that day now? So if I turn up on Wednesday will everything be gone by then? Christmas is confusing. Not only in term of when the holiday is, but our society is also confused as to what the day is actually celebrating. Even Christians, I've noticed, speak about Christmas in different ways. If you want a good measure of what our culture thinks about anything, Google is your best friend. I think I've spoken about this once before, but don't you love Google auto-complete? You start typing in your search and it makes a suggestion as to how you might finish your enquiry based on the top responses of other Google users. Let's have a look: "Christmas is about: *family, giving, Jesus, love.*" Let's change the search term for a bit, "Christmas is *not* about: *Jesus, giving*". So is it or isn't it about these things? I think it's actually about all these things, and I assume that if you are here with us this morning, then you do have Jesus as at least *one reason* why you celebrate this festival.

But what is it about Jesus that makes his birth worth celebrating? This is where I've noticed some differences of opinion even among Christians. Some Christians speak about Jesus in terms of the example that he sets: his humble beginnings ought to inspire us towards a greater humility, because Jesus was poor we too ought to remember the poor among us. I must say that both those things are true; if we are followers of Christ then we are followers of his example. But when you read through the account of Christ's birth in Luke's Gospel, it's a different emphasis that becomes apparent. Here's my Bible, and some years ago I made a note in the margin below today's reading: *note the theme of salvation in Luke's Christmas narrative.* If Christmas is about Jesus—and it certainly is—then it's about the Jesus who brings us *salvation* before it's about the Jesus who leaves us with an *example*.

Our passage this morning comes from the middle of Luke's Christmas story, and it's the words of a hymn that Zechariah sung as God started moving within his family. His wife was pregnant with John the Baptist, and his wife's close relative Mary was pregnant with Jesus. What was Zechariah's understanding of what God was doing at that first Christmas, and how well does it align with your own understanding?

Let's have a look, Luke 1:68 Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. <sup>69</sup> He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David <sup>70</sup> (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), <sup>71</sup> salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us

Note how often in these opening verses Zechariah sings of God's saving work:

V 68 He has come to his people and redeemed them;

V 69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us.

If God is in the salvation business, then *what* or *who* is he is saving us from?

Zechariah sings of a salvation that's effected in three ways, the first is mentioned there in verse 71: salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. In Zechariah's mind the enemy was probably the governing Romans. Rome was the region's superpower, imposing themselves over Israel, but as Luke's story unfolds we see Jesus is interested in another enemy. In Luke Ch 10, Jesus sends his disciples out to do some ministry on their own, and they return full of excitement saying to Jesus "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." To which Jesus replies "I have given you authority to overcome all the power of the enemy" The enemy Jesus has his eye on is the enemy who operates in the Spiritual realm.

One of the news stories that gets repeated every Christmas is the story about those toys which get banned because they've been discovered to be really dangerous. There's a group that call themselves W.A.T.C.H (World Against Toys Causing Harm) and each year they publish a list of dangerous toys. Here's one of their no-no-s for 2016: *Banzai Bump 'n Bounce Body bumpers*.



Can you imagine the carnage? I love how the children are gleefully running towards their next trip to the Emergency Department. Dad's rubbing his hands in eager anticipation of what's about to happen. Looks like fun but it's a disaster in waiting; it could even be deadly. The worst offenders are those toys that have hidden dangers: the projectiles that can injure an eye; the bits that break-off as choke hazards. All the parents among us are now wondering whether they've bought wisely!

Jesus wants to open our eyes to a hidden danger. There is more to this world than what we can see and hear; there is a very real spiritual dimension that's often hidden. The Devil and his associates wish to cause us harm. Sometimes this emerges through human aggression—the violence of King Herod in Matthew 2 is one example—but most often it comes when the Devil tempts us to turn our backs on God. Because by living our own way—what the Bible calls sin—we become alienated from God and eternal life is placed out of our reach. It's a terrible situation that the Devil leads us into, a situation that we need saving from. And Zechariah's song exclaims that this salvation is precisely what God is providing as the first Christmas takes place!

How does God provide this? Let's move on to the second section of our passage, where we hear that God provides salvation from our enemy by providing salvation from ourselves. From Verse 76 Zechariah's attention moves from Jesus to his own Son, John. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation *through the*

*forgiveness of their sins.* How does God defeat the power of the Devil? Through the forgiveness of sins! If our enemy's strategy is to have us give in to sin—to turn our backs on God then that's a strategy that's completely undone if God forgives us.

Out the front of our house we have a little Spider that's made his home with us. I often forget he's there until I leave through the front door in the morning, and then I remember as I walk into his web. And you know how it is when you walk into a spider's web, you start flailing around trying to get it off, worrying that the spider is somewhere on your face or in your hair, and the more you move around the more the web gets stuck to you. The other morning all three of us were leaving and I'm just about to walk straight into it with the pram but I stop and see it. And as I'm trying to work out my next step my incredibly practical wife simply says "Stand still" and with one movement she pinches one of the web's anchoring strands, and the whole thing just floats away to one side.

The mess we find ourselves in is a bit like a web; there are lots of strands leaving us entangled: we have an enemy who trying to trip us up, we ourselves fall into temptation and turn away from God, sometimes we try and make things better by inventing religious rules—deny yourself this indulgence, give x amount of dollars to charity—but they make things worse because the more rules you have the more likely you are to fail. But all that is required is one move and the web falls away. That one move is the forgiveness of our sins, a move that God does on our behalf, a move that is made possible by the arrival of Jesus. He would grow up to make possible the forgiveness of sins by his death on the cross. And once our sins are forgiven then there is no anger from God, there is no judgment, there is no alienation from God, there is no missing out on eternal life and this wonderful truth was not lost on Zechariah, who saw God acting on that first Christmas to enable the forgiveness of sins.

Salvation from our enemy, salvation from ourselves, and this saving work of God leads into a third area: salvation from *fear*. Have a look back at verse 74. God's salvation enables us to serve him without fear. As human beings we have become very good at hiding our vulnerabilities. We become very good at putting on a happy face, or a strong face, or an intimidating face, whichever face it is that we think will do the trick. But lots of us are fearful. We are fearful of not being loved, we are fearful of not being successful, we are fearful of losing what we have.

Despite what people might think about God, he doesn't want us to live in fear. Have a look at verse 78. The forgiveness of our sins comes about by what Zechariah calls the tender mercy of our God. God has a great deal of gentle affection for us, and if we understand and accept this then it can do a lot to dispel our fears. If we fear that others might have cold hearts towards us, we can take comfort in the fact that God's heart is always warm towards us. If we fear failure, we can know that in God we have someone who will cheer us on. If we fear losing what we have then we can be comforted by knowing that the God who owns everything has an enduring soft-spot

for us. And if we fear *death*, we can know that the God who forgives our sins will be waiting to receive us with open arms.

Note to whom God's tender mercy extends in verse 79. It will shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. As a minister working next door to a hospital I get called over from time to time to minister to people who are dying. Often that's the time when the brave face starts to slip, some are very afraid. But I've met with some Christians in that situation who are remarkably calm and at peace. What's the difference? They know of God's salvation. They know who Jesus is—that he's God's Saviour—and they've entrusted themselves to him. God doesn't want us to be afraid, and there's no reason to be if we have grasped this concept that Christianity is all about God's tender mercy, a mercy which manifests itself in a remarkable offer of salvation.

There was lots of singing at the first Christmas, have you noticed this? Mary sings, Zechariah sings; it's one tradition that we continue whenever we sing carols. And as long as we are singing carols then we won't be missing the theme of salvation. Because many of our traditional carols make this theme a focus. What's been your focus this Christmas? I think it's hard to have just one, but if we understand the element of Christ arriving among us as savior, then we've understood the heart of what God was doing at Christmas, and we've understood that it really is about his gift to us. I hope you'll accept it.