

Sermon: A Christmas to remember

My first Christmas was 1968, but I don't remember much about my first Christmas... or any of 1968 really. But it turns out that 1968 was an eventful year, and Christmas 1968 was a Christmas to remember.

Much of what happened centred on the USA. In April, Martin Luther King Junior had been assassinated. In June, presidential hopeful Robert Kennedy had been assassinated. The Vietnam War was still raging. Hundreds were arrested in anti-war protests in Australia. The cold war was still simmering.

Back in 1961, President John F Kennedy had made a speech which gave the US a bold national goal – that the “nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.” The space race against the Russians was in full flight, but by the end of 1968, NASA wasn't ready for a moon landing – they didn't yet have a moon lander, and there wasn't much of the decade left.

But they did have the Saturn V rocket, and they did have the Apollo command module, so they decided to test what they had at the end of 1968 – to literally go where no man had gone before.

A few days before Christmas, they launched Apollo 8, with a crew of three astronauts: Frank Borman, James Lovell, and William Anders.

Apollo 8 took three days to travel to the moon. They spent a day orbiting the moon, and then they travelled three days back to earth, before splashing down safely in the Pacific Ocean.

At the end of 1968, Apollo 8 was the biggest news there was.

The three astronauts had travelled further than any else had ever travelled, and they travelled faster than anyone else ever had. They were the first humans to directly see the far side of the moon. They were the first to see the earth rising and they made a live television broadcast from lunar orbit.

The picture was obvious – the astronauts held the camera to the window, and millions of people on earth could see the moonscape rolling below. At the time, it was the most watched television broadcast in history – it was

Christmas Eve in the US, and about 1pm Christmas Day Sydney time. The picture was the moon, but the commentary was up to the astronauts – there was no script and no direction from Houston.

The three astronauts had discussed what to say during this historic broadcast among themselves, and when the pictures came on, with millions and millions watching, the astronauts began speaking:

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good.” (Genesis 1:1-4a, KJV). And so on

Taking turns to read, they read through the first ten verses of Genesis.

What a profound thing. They could have said “We beat the Russians to the moon” or “all the way with USA” or something. But they chose “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”

When they returned to earth, the crew were hailed as heroes. The astronauts were jointly named Time Magazine’s Men of the Year.

Telegrams and letters of congratulations poured in to NASA. And amongst these was a telegram from a woman in Texas which said simply:

“Thank you Apollo 8. You saved 1968”. After all the bad news of the year, the war, the protests, the riots, the assassinations, there was this good news, this success, this hope – the moon landing was no longer a dream, but it was just the next step.

“Thank you Apollo 8. You saved 1968” – there was light at the end of a dark decade.

And, like Apollo 8, Isaiah shared good news: Our reading from Isaiah tells us of a light shining in the darkness, and brings us a message of hope.

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (9:2)*

Like the Apollo 8 astronauts would do more than 2000 years later, Isaiah gives people living in dark times hope that things will get better –

Isaiah prophesied hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Before the name 'Jesus' was known. But even then, the promises of God were known. Isaiah was so confident in those promises that he wrote in the past tense: *on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*

Isaiah writes with certainty of the success of God, the triumph of God, and the people's rejoicing.

"You have enlarged the nation," he says, "and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest...

you have shattered the yoke that burdens them,

the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. (9:3-5)

The burdens of lives will be replaced with joy... and the boots of the warriors and garments soaked in blood will be burned because they will never be used again.

Amazing stuff. And then we come to verse 6 where Isaiah goes on to tell us how that will be accomplished – in words which we know so well from the words of Handel's Messiah:

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.*

And he will be called

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (9:6)

The child is the child in the manger in Bethlehem. The son of a young woman, born in humble circumstances. But Jesus is so much more than that defenceless baby, and Isaiah gives him four titles: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

As the Wonderful Counselor, he knows the needs of every individual. He is aware of all the problems in people's lives. He has lived a human life and knows the fears, troubles, disappointments experienced by people, and he gives us courage and wisdom in response.

As the Everlasting Father, he is always there. We read in John's gospel that he was there in the beginning, and we read in the book of Revelation that he is the beginning and the end.

Jesus came into the world to establish peace between his Father and all the people who had turned away from him. Jesus, that child whose birth we remember especially today was God. Not a messenger from God. Not simply a wise and great teacher. Not simply compassionate and understanding. But mighty God, as Isaiah says.

And this mighty God gave himself up for us, by his death on the cross. Because of all that Jesus did for us, we now have peace with God. Peace on earth. Goodwill to all people. Immanuel. God with us.

And so the fourth title that Isaiah confers on Jesus is the Prince of Peace, the one who offers true and lasting peace - everlasting peace - to all people.

As Isaiah tells us: *"Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end."* (9:7a)

And the future looks truly bright:

"He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this." (9:7b)

We can see that what Jesus offers us and all people isn't a temporary measure.

For our society though, and often in our own lives, it's easy to push God to the side. To ignore God. Because we all like to look after ourselves – and those close to us. We like to solve problems for ourselves, and we tend to think others should solve problems for themselves, too. When it gets down to it, we're selfish. And thousands of years of history shows us that selfishness and self-interest don't work. We can't solve all the problems of the world for ourselves. People always find things to fight over, or want what they can't have - or take what they shouldn't have and so on.

As we contemplate this, we realise that it is only God who, through Jesus, can and will solve the problems of the world.

Christmas is so often a time for remembering. The events of our own lives, the joyous first Christmas with your spouse or newborn child, or the first time the next generation took over preparing the meal.

And Christmas is a time for remembering events of the world too – from the destruction of Darwin in 1974 or back to the Christmas Truce of 1914, when soldiers from both sides on the Western Front entered no-man’s land between the trenches, mingled, exchanged souvenirs and food, played football and sang Christmas carols. And no doubt, in future years, we’ll be remembering the Covid Christmases of 2020 and 2021 as well.

More than fifty years ago, three men left the earth for a week to circle the moon, and arrived back on earth bringing with them hope, and light for dark times – and saving 1968, as that telegram put it.

But the most important Christmas to remember is that first Christmas in Bethlehem – when God’s only son arrived on earth, as Isaiah had long before prophesied, the wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting Father and prince of peace. He brought with him hope, hope for dark times – not just those dark times, but all dark times - the hope of peace – everlasting peace. And when Jesus arrived, he saved not only 1968, but every year before and since, and every year to come.

We can look across the world and see it is so often anything but peaceful. We have conflicts across the world. Hundreds of thousands of people are displaced. People are locked down. People have lost livelihoods.

People try to solve these problems - and we should try – and we often think that through effort and hard work and goodwill, the world can be put right. It’s a noble idea, but it’s something that I think history teaches us is not possible.

There have always been things to fight about, there has always been misfortune, there has always been suffering.

And people will always find things to fight about, there will always be misfortune, and there will always be suffering. And I think the ultimate cause of all those problems is that we – all people – have turned away from the way God wants us to live – turned away from loving God and turned away from loving our neighbours as ourselves.

But although we can't solve all the problems ourselves, because of what God has done for us, because of that first Christmas in Bethlehem, we don't need to. Because ultimately, God will solve all those problems.

That's the heart of the Christmas message: Peace on earth. Goodwill to all people. Immanuel. God with us.

We hear the message every year, and we can get so used to it that we can become complacent – or distracted by all the other things of Christmas, but it's wonderful to be able to gather with Christians here and elsewhere and hear again, or maybe hear anew, the message of God's love to us in Jesus.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us. He is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

In Jesus, in that child born in a stable in Bethlehem, to us a child is born, to us all, a hope is given.

Amen