

The first Christmas tree

A couple of years ago, at the start of the Christmas school holidays, Beth and I went on a driving holiday down the south coast, and back up across the Monaro Plain to Cooma. One thing we noticed while we were away was the variety of idiosyncratic Christmas decorations around the place – from Santa hats on fenceposts just outside of Nowra, to a snowman made from of a stack of tyres painted white near Bega. But one seemed to be everywhere we went, from Batemans Bay through to Cooma, were plywood cut-out Santa Clauses, which adorned just about any business that had a suitable awning.

The design seems quite old, and a bit amateurish – but we don't know how old they are or who made them... or where they all get stored between Christmases. They seemed to have been made of good quality plywood though, so I think they'll be around for a few years yet.

In southern NSW, it seems that the plywood cut-out Santa Claus is the most popular symbol of Christmas... but have you ever wondered what the most popular Christmas symbol everywhere else is?

Some will say it's tinsel. Some will say it's Santa Claus. Other contenders include angels, stars, candles, baubles, nativity scenes, snowmen, the gift wrapped present possibly even the elf-on-the-shelf.

But there's one I think that stands out from all the others. It is uniquely shaped and has a special relationship with all the other Christmas symbols.

And that's the Christmas tree.

Decorating things with evergreen branches in Europe goes back a long way, but the Christmas tree as we know it came about in the 18th century – first in Germany, and then was brought to England first by Queen Charlotte (George III's wife), and then popularised by Prince Albert (Victoria's husband). Apparently, pictures of Queen Victoria's decorated Christmas tree were published in America in the 1840s, which prompted the start of the Christmas tree tradition there... I couldn't find any record of Australia's first Christmas trees, but I reckon it would have been about the same time. I've also heard stories of how the people of Sydney in the second half of the nineteenth century almost wiped out the local population of native Christmas bush, as, at that time there was nothing like a traditional Christmas tree available.

Most places that have Christmas decorations will have a Christmas tree. Homes. Schools. Shops. Churches. Even public spaces – and local councils seem to like erecting particularly large Christmas trees – though in keeping with local council guidelines, they are generally fenced off and adorned with do not climb and other warning signs.

Christmas trees tend to be large. After all, so many of the other Christmas symbols end up being hung from, draped over, or put under the tree, so they need to be large.

Most of the Christmas trees we encounter are artificial – although some of the plastic ones these days look pretty real. In my childhood though, we had a Christmas tree that was almost entirely made of metal. It had a timber trunk – but the branches were steel rods and the leaves were metal tinsel. I have fond memories of that tree, of the hour or so it took to assemble it, and of the small cuts and scrapes I would get on my hands from all those metal components. The metal components were also claimed to be the reason we couldn't have lights on that tree – there would be too much risk of electrification.

Even so-called real trees generally don't last for too long after Christmas: I often see them poking out of green bins in early January. They've been cut off from their roots and put in a metal stand for a few weeks – so there's not much life left in them.

There are a few people who do use a real live and growing tree and bring it inside every year, and then drag it back out. And do that year on year until it gets unmanageable.

Very few people ever plant a Christmas tree in the ground, and then “do Christmas” around it.

But our reading from Isaiah today, tells us about a God planting a Christmas tree in the ground of Bethlehem, and then all of Christmas happening around it.

In the previous chapters 9 and 10 of Isaiah God said it was his plan to cut down the trees of Assyria and Israel.

Of Assyria He says: “See, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will lop off the boughs with great power. The lofty trees will be felled, the tall ones will be brought low. He will cut down the forest thickets with an ax; Lebanon will fall before the Mighty One.” Isaiah 10:33-34

And of Israel: “So the LORD will cut off from Israel both head and tail, both palm branch and reed in a single day... Surely wickedness burns like a fire; it consumes briars and thorns, it sets the forest thickets ablaze, so that it rolls upward in a column of smoke.” Isaiah 9:14 & 18

Those trees symbolized the power and majesty of those two nations. And God was telling us that He was going to take an axe and go through the forests of their power. When He finished with them, there would be nothing left of their pride and might.

But then – in the devastation that was left behind he was going to graft a shoot into one of the stumps left behind and grow a new tree – the first Christmas tree . “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.” Isaiah 11:1

Isaiah's prophecy has two elements – the stump of Jesse, and a new shoot.

You might remember that Jesse was the father of David - David of David and Goliath fame. David who would go on to be a great leader and the second king of Israel. David was the youngest son of Jesse, and probably the last person anybody expected to be anointed king (1 Samuel 16:6-13), but he had become a king – and a great king at that.

The people of Israel expected the messiah to come from David's line.

But the years hadn't been kind to the house of David... it had become a figurative stump. Yet out of this root there would spring a shoot which would grow up into the expected righteous branch (Jeremiah 23:5) - and Isaiah says that the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.

Of course, this is not Isaiah's only prophecy about the coming messiah – back in chapter Isaiah 7 we learn that a virgin would conceive and give birth to a son and we would call his name Immanuel – which means ‘God with us’. Then in chapter 9, Isaiah tells us that God said the child would minister in Galilee and that He would be a great ruler and leader of His people. And that this Messiah would be a light to the people walking in darkness.

And now here in Isaiah 11 we're told this Messiah would be like a great tree growing out of the stump of Jesse.

Messiah is the Hebrew word for 'anointed one', and the Greek translation which we know so well from the new testament is 'Christ'

So in Chapter 11, Isaiah is telling us that, effectively, God was going to plant a Christmas tree – the first Christmas tree - in Bethlehem.

But God's Christmas tree isn't a Christmas tree like most of those we know today. Not given pride of place for a couple of weeks and then either thrown away or put away in a cupboard for another year.

God's Christmas tree isn't merely evergreen - it is ever-present.

Because God's Christmas tree is Jesus.

The tree God planted in Bethlehem became an important tree – a tree whose importance goes far beyond Bethlehem.

We can see that Isaiah's prophecy "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse", been fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus was born in the line of David - the stump of Jesse.

And along with that there are over 300 prophecies in the Old Testament about the coming Messiah - all of which were fulfilled in Jesus.

The shoot that Isaiah prophecies is not just a just a branch, but it's a growing, productive branch, because he says "From his roots a branch will bear fruit"

Of course, the Christmas trees that we know today don't usually bear fruit!

In fact, they're usually either dead or artificial, so we have to hang whatever fruit they may have from their branches.

But the tree God planted in Bethlehem – the Messiah who was to come - that tree would bear fruit. And the next few verses of Isaiah tell us about that fruit:

"The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest." (11:6-8)

There are people who say this prophecy is a literal. They believe a day is coming when wolves will literally lie down beside literal lambs, and children could play with cobras and not get hurt.

Well, I guess that might happen someday... but I don't think that's what this prophecy is about.

I think it's about Jesus changing the accepted order of the world. Solving the problems and the pain and the hurt of the world. The imagery used by Isaiah is absolutely outside the natural order of things – leopards lying down with goats, calves and lions together, lions eating straw. It just doesn't happen. Isaiah is sharing a vision of peace beyond that which occurs as part of the world we know.

He prophesies Jesus bringing hope and joy and peace and love to a world of despair and hopelessness and sadness and conflict.

In Jesus coming into the world, born in that stable in Bethlehem, becoming God's Christmas tree, he brings us hope and joy and peace and love. The things that we remind ourselves each advent when we light our advent candles.

We know from the gospel accounts of course, that the story doesn't end there. We know that there were people who sought to cut down God's Christmas tree – they conspired against Jesus, they betrayed him, they beat him, they humiliated him, they nailed him to a cross, and they killed him.

But they couldn't overcome him, and he rose again.

And God's Christmas tree still stands today. And the fruit of God's Christmas tree – hope and joy and peace and love is still there for each one of us.

In our homes, most of us will have Christmas trees decorated with lights, and tinsel and bells and baubles and all the rest of it - and that's good. But those trees are either artificial or dead. And when the season passes, they'll be stored back in boxes, or simply thrown away.

But the first Christmas tree – God's Christmas tree – is a living tree. And that's the one we need in our homes. And in our lives and in our hearts. And in our world. Because that tree is the shoot from the stump of Jesse, that tree is Jesus.

Amen.