

Christmas Eve - 2015 (Titus 2:11, 14)

[Idea Creative Worship - 2001]

The grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people. ... He gave his life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us his very own people, totally committed to doing what is right.

Celebrate the Saviour's Birth Through Song [Tune: Vom Himmel hoch]

It has been repeated over and over - even though it does not say it anywhere in the Bible - that Jesus was born in a stable. [We will sing it again in the carol after this message: Once in royal David's city stood a lowly cattle-shed].

How then, do we have stables in our nativity scenes, and in the paintings of the birth of Christ, if the only mention is of a manger in the Gospel of Luke? One can only assume that for people in Europe mangers were to be found in stables - especially in winter. So - to their thinking - there had to be a stable, even if none is mentioned - so the legend of the stable was born.

So much of the Christmas story, and of the way in which Christmas is celebrated is a matter of legend and tradition. But what is it that we are to hear here this evening, gathered to worship and celebrate the 'babe in the manger'?

We start by hearing the message of the angels again, as *we sing*:

To you this night is born a child of Mary, chosen virgin mild; this newborn child, of lowly birth, shall be the joy of all the earth.

He shall be the joy of all the earth - not because of all the Christmas gifts, but - as Paul writes in his letter to Titus - that in the birth of Christ **the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people.**

God's grace is revealed - he is not the angry God some people think him to be, just waiting for an opportunity to catch us doing something wrong. His intention is to help us. So God makes his grace known - he draws back the curtain, that we can see something of who he is - by becoming a human like

us. Listen to the words of the angels, as *we sing*:

The blessing which the Father planned the Son holds in his infant hand that in his kingdom, bright and fair, you may with us his glory share.

We are to share in the glory God has for us. But for that to happen, things had to change - we had to be changed. In spite of our best efforts to have things perfect for Christmas, we need to hear again that God did not send his Son into a world that was perfect. God sends his Son, **bringing salvation to all people.** Jesus comes to a world that needs saving - that is true as much today as it was 2,000 years ago!

The question is: is the world ready to receive him? We heard again how it was back in Bethlehem - there was no place for him. Much like the refugees in many places of the world, God's Son found our world to be an unwelcoming place. How about you and me today. Can *we sing* these words with conviction?

Welcome to earth, o noble Guest, through whom this sinful world is blest! You turned not from our needs away! How can our thanks such love repay?

So often the legends about the birth of Jesus - and all the traditions we have taken over from previous generations - tend to cover over this fact: "this sinful world is blest" by his coming. I said earlier on, that Jesus did not come into a world that was perfect - he did not come for people who are perfect. This truth is not meant to make us feel bad - Christmas after all, is about the Good News God makes know to us. His purpose with the coming of Jesus, is to bring **salvation to all people** - to those who know that they need it, as much as to those who are not (yet) aware of their need of a Saviour.

That's a bit like me starting out on the 94.7 confident of completing the event in good time. Only that was not how it ended - instead I began to cramp, and eventually had to stop riding with a pain in my chest and in my left arm. Looking at me before the start, nobody would have guessed that I would suffer a light heart-attack while riding.

Our condition - our need for a Saviour - does not depend on how we look, or how other people see us. It's also not a case of what our world thinks of us. Christmas came about, because of our need to be saved. It does not matter how confident we are that everything is OK in our lives - God sees deeper, and that is why he sent Jesus to us.

We celebrate today, because God sent Jesus to save - not to judge or punish. He sent him as a small infant - not at the head of the many legions of angels to destroy those who stood against him. It is with wonder that *we sing*:

O Lord, you have created all! How did you come to be so small, to sweetly sleep in manger bed where lowing cattle lately fed?

Jesus - by God's grace - comes to be one of us. At his birth we hear of all the angels appearing - but they come to shepherds out on the fields. We have grown so accustomed to hearing this - after all the shepherds are part of every nativity play and scene. Do we still hear, however, that these people who lived right on the fringes of society, are the only people to have ever heard the choir of all the angels!

That is what God's grace is about - he comes to those who least expect it - he becomes small, so as not to overwhelm us in our time of need. The shepherds were sent to find this baby in surroundings they were familiar with - he would be like any other child.

Please sing:

These are the signs which you will mark: the swaddling clothes and manger dark. There you will find the infant laid, by whom the heav'n and earth were made.

There was nothing in his appearance to mark him out as being special. We do not hear of him being a beautiful baby, in fact if we read what Isaiah wrote 700 years earlier, it would appear that the opposite applied: **“There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him.**

God wants to save all of people. That is the message - the gift - revealed to

us again today. You may feel that there is something in your life which stops him from coming to you - yet tonight he wants to reassure you that Jesus **gave his life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us his very own people.** You don't first have to prove to God that you are OK - he wants to come into your life. ***So let us sing:***

O dearest Jesus, holy child, prepare a bed, soft, undefiled, a holy shrine, within my heart, that you and I need never part.

I don't know if you came with enough space in your heart for Him tonight. But you are to know that Jesus is here for you today - and his greatest wish is that you will receive him. It does not matter to him if you have not 'dressed yourself up' for the occasion. God invites you to hear the message of the angels on that first Christmas as his message to you today as well:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to all on whom God's favour rests”.

God's 'favour' rests on you! The message of great joy for all people is his message to you: Jesus was born for you! He was born so that you may have real life.

That is why we may respond and sing with great joy:

(please stand)

My heart with very joy now leaps, my voice no longer silence keeps;
I too must join the angel throng to sing with joy his cradlesong:

“Glory to God in highest heav'n who unto us his Son has giv'n.” With angels sing to all the earth, that God has blessed us by his birth!