

FOCUS ON FAITH

Stephen G. Derges, Pastor of Bridgnorth Baptist Church



CHRISTMAS STARTS WITH CHRIST

"Christmas comes but once a year" – "and a jolly good thing too!" many people respond. After all it can be tough for many families especially in the harsh economic climate we're facing to afford the presents the children want and to make ends meet. Or perhaps for some Christmas brings painful memories of loved ones who will be missing or of other experiences they'd rather forget.

But Christmas is a special time of the year – there is a certain awe-inspiring atmosphere about the celebrations, the presents, the cards, the time with family and friends.

However Christmas does come with a few problematic issues. Is Christmas becoming an event of the past? It's a good question to ask bearing in mind the present trend to *"de-Christmas"* our annual celebration. Of course originally Christmas was a pagan festival and I appreciate that Jesus wasn't actually born on 25th December. But in our politically correct, increasingly secular, multi-faith and multi-cultural society it's even been re-named as *"Winterfest"* or worse still *"Winterval"*. So whilst I certainly wouldn't want to offend those of other faiths (or no faith at all) I feel it's important to reclaim Christmas because when we lose the basis of what we're supposed to be celebrating then it won't be long before the meaning slides into obscurity.

...Christmas is all about God taking the initiative because we can't do it ourselves!

I also recognise that many people find the whole story of Christmas fanciful and difficult to believe:

- A young teenager engaged to be married is visited by an angel and told she's going to become pregnant even though she's a virgin
- A carpenter (who also has an angelic visitation) is convinced to stick by his fiancé even though the stigma and shame would be incredibly tough to handle
- The long trip to Bethlehem for the census ordered by a Roman Caesar (by the way there's no mention of Mary riding on a donkey in the Bible so who knows where that came from)
- The lack of accommodation meaning she gives birth in a less than pleasant (and no doubt unsanitized) environment
- Shepherds and visiting foreign dignitaries who come calling with presents

- A speedy escape to Egypt because a megalomaniac local despot wants to get rid of a baby who he believes threatens his authority

And that's all without what appears to be the most incredible assertion in the whole story – that this baby is the Son of God. In Matthew 1:21 the Bible records that the angel who visited Joseph the carpenter tells him that he should call the baby Jesus ***"because he will save his people from their sins"***.

Ouch! It's a lovely story even though it's hard to fully understand but this statement takes it to a whole new level.

None of us likes to think that we're sinners; that we've done bad stuff but let's be real, we know we have. We've hurt other people physically or emotionally; we've lied or certainly not told the whole truth; we've cheated; we've let ourselves and other people down and done a whole lot more that has broken the relationship between us and God.

But this is where Christmas is so wonderful – it's the start of God's rescue plan and it's what makes the Christian faith unique. Christmas is all about God taking the initiative because we can't do it ourselves! It's not about us trying to find a way back to be reconciled with God. It's all about God coming to us to salvage a relationship that's been broken.

So why do we find it hard to believe God's version of Christmas?

After all we tell our kids that there's a jolly old chap living up in Lapland who with a bunch of little helpers makes toys and games and rides on a magical chariot pulled by reindeer across the whole world to deliver presents down the chimney on Christmas Eve. But only if they've been good!

The real Christmas story is not a case of the truth being stranger than fiction! The reality is that God loves us all and wants us to have a relationship with Him. And it starts with a baby in a manger who grows up to become the Saviour on the Cross.

We'll only be able to celebrate the real meaning of Christmas when we focus on the reality of God's love for us.

Let's not forget that **Christmas starts with Christ**.

To find out more about the Christian faith and resources available plus information on Christmas services at local Churches together with contact details, please log on to www.lifting-jesus-higher.org.uk.