

WHAT MAKES FOR A HAPPY CHRISTMAS?

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Luke 1: 26-46.

1. It's going to be better than last Christmas. Or is it?

People are more and more anxious about what kind of Christmas it will be this year. Will it be better than last year? Or will it be effectively cancelled again? Last Christmas it was the 'Kent Variant' that wreaked havoc with Christmas plans. This year it is the Omicron variant. Will we ever get ahead of the variants? Or will Christmas be hostage again next year to the latest variant to appear?

But what does make for a Happy Christmas for us? What are the things that count the most? There are many good things that go towards what traditionally happens at Christmas. There will be time with family and friends. There will be time to stop and rest. Yet for many people, Christmas is a time when they especially miss loved ones. Neither is it always a happy time because of ill health or worries about money.

Yet, actually, at heart, a Happy Christmas is within reach of us all.

2. Happy Christmas? Really?

Behind the traditions, there is an unchanging reality that is immune to the troubles caused by variants or anything else. It is built upon God's unwavering stance towards this world. This is the reality beyond all realities that there is a God who loves justice, righteousness and goodness. He is beyond us and above us. He has no beginning and no end. He dwells in heaven where there are no lockdowns and the only reason angels cover their faces is not out of fear of spreading viruses but because of the holiness of God. This God is self-existent and has no needs that have to be supplied by others. He has life in Himself, foreseeing and foreknowing things. Everywhere in the world there are hints of His majesty and greatness. There are providences and answers to prayers. There are amazing interventions and outcomes. This is the God who looks down on this troubled world and its troubled people.

Our position is not one of happiness in its best and fullest sense, of being in a good relationship with this great God. Mary describes her estate as being humble. She knows that she occupies a lowly position and is not exalted. It is not as though, as many do today, that she looks upon mankind as a parasite or a pestilence upon the earth. It is less our effect upon the natural environment that man should look askance at himself

for. More worrying is the effect of his being and behaviour on his relationship with His Maker and his Judge. It is a sad indication of man's failure to understand his natural state that a banner publicly proclaiming the gospel at the COPD26 summit in Glasgow for delegates to see was torn down. For really, behind all our problems, lies the problem for our rebellion against God. At heart we hate the true God. We suffer and then we hate God. Life does not work out for us, so we hate God. We have lawless and disobedient hearts, hard-wired to distrust and cast aside the laws of God. We may agree that dreadful crimes are a sign that hearts are evil but are reluctant to draw the conclusion that we all have hearts capable of great evil. We commit acts of deceit, or greed or self-centredness with great ease.

Then there is the lack of concern for spiritual things. We can easily have 'No worship days' and think nothing of it. Or 'No prayer days.' Or 'No Bible reading days.' Our lawlessness may be a polite kind. Or a generous kind. But it is still rebellion against God. And all of these things do not make for a Happy Christmas but will see us exiled from God in hell.

3. But it is a Happy Christmas!

In fact, it can be a Happy March 8th or June 12th or October 30th. We can be happy not in a foolish and vain way, nor in a drug-induced way. We can have peace and happiness in the very depths of the soul. Christmas is about God doing something remarkable for us. As Mary saw, He has looked down on us. He has remembered us, and we are blessed. In speaking like this Mary is speaking for all people who have come to know the Lord.

God made something to happen. He brought salvation to His people. His work of creation made it possible for lawless people to become His own people. He came to remove the sentence hanging over sinners and to make them happy and blessed instead. Sending His Son is as if God is saying that He has come to help and to rescue us. Through His son He speaks forgiveness and pardon. He assures us that hostilities have ended and that God desires that there should be peace between Himself and sinful humanity. It tells us that He is willing to lay His anger aside because His Son has borne our penalty instead. The Lord Jesus is made to face the anger of God and meet with God as though a guilty sinner on the cross in our place.

The Son lived a pure and obedient life. He had moral excellence, courage, faithfulness and patience among many other things. But He permitted all that purity and glory to be despised and rejected, submitting to the death that alone could obtain forgiveness for sinners.

We can be made happy this Christmas by trusting in Him and believing in Him. We recognize our low estate in the sight of God and repent of our pride and foolishness. Here we find peace for the guilty conscience and rest for those troubled at the thought

of judgment. There is now no condemnation to dread. This is the best of gifts. It is a sweet communication from above. It is heaven today and for always.