

Back to an “Old Normal” Christmas by Rev. Dr. Simon Lee

Dear brothers and sisters of RCAC,

It is the worst of times. It is the best of times. This is inspired by a quote from Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* that I remember from my secondary school days: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...” Christmas 2020 is a Christmas that is not “normal,” like no other that we had previously experienced. Also, we have been talking about expecting a “new normal” because of the pandemic. But with Christmas, I think we are in fact going “Back to an ‘Old Normal’,” or at least we will be more able to rethink what the first Christmas was really like. Yes, let’s start with the bad news and then go to the good news, after looking around us.

Right now, with the renewed lockdown a few weeks ago due to the second wave of the COVID pandemic, many people will no longer be able to celebrate Christmas like they used to do in the past. The usual rush in travel to be “home for Christmas” will not be possible for a lot of people as they will have to go into a quarantine of 14 days before they can see their folks they want to visit, and have to do the same when they return to their home. Many vacations will become staycations. The annual Christmas lights seem to be strangely dim and less people on the streets and in the malls; they will not be able to create the usual festive mood. The usual Christmas carols that fill the air will sound hollow. Can we really sing “Joy to the World?” There will not be the usual Christmas services, and there will be no Christmas caroling. The mall will not be filled with people all frantically trying to shop for the best Christmas gifts for their loved ones in the last minute. Many Santa’s will be out of a job! After the Christmas holidays, there will be probably a lot of shops that will be closed declaring bankruptcy, as too many people will resort to buying online. Everyone (at least most people) will be going around with masks like they did in the many plagues pandemic in past history. Yes, this will not be the “joyous” Christmas that we have always anticipated at this time of the year. We are in the worst of times!

But maybe this is in fact a good thing. I like to think of our Christmas this year with COVID as an opportunity to really “go back” to what it was like in the first Christmas, before all the church traditions and commercialization made it into a “holiday season” that leaves “Christ” out of “Christ-mas.” Maybe when all these trappings of Christmas are removed, we will be able to rediscover and truly celebrate the real “reason” for the “season.” Let us therefore go back to rediscovering what it was like in the first Christmas when Christ was born in Bethlehem:

1. The first Christmas was a time of political unrest and social tension in society

First of all, the Jewish people in Israel were governed by the Romans who were conducting a census at the time that forced the people to leave their home to go back to their birthplace (Lk 2:1-7). As a result, people were travelling here and there, not because they were happy to do so, but reluctantly because they had to. In fact, that was what happened to Joseph and Mary who had to travel from Galilee to Bethlehem, even though Mary was ready to give birth to Jesus at any time, they had no option but to take the journey. Maybe because they waited till it was too late and so many people were also travelling, “there was no place for them in the inn!” (Lk. 2:7)

Another picture of the hideous time can be seen from the story of the visit of the Wise Men from the east, sometime after the birth of Christ, recorded for us in the account by Matthew (Mt. 2:1-18). Herod the “puppet” king was so fearful of what might happen to his rule, that he plotted to follow the info of the wise men when they find “he who has been born king of the Jews” so as to do harm to Jesus with the pretense of “that I too may come and worship him.” (2:8b) The story ended tragically with

genocide, the slaughter of all male children under two years old in Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary with the baby Jesus became refugees to Egypt!

So we can see the first Christmas was totally devoid of any festive mood, it was instead filled with fear and anxiety, the people lived amidst the brutal and tyrannical rule of a very insecure “puppet” king that served the Roman Empire. Today we find ourselves similarly in our war-torn, poverty-stricken, politically-racially-divided and morally-decadent world. The COVID 19 has only made the situation worse by adding a viral infection pandemic that has also resulted in a global economic crisis. So though the causes of our distress are somewhat different, we are nevertheless definitely in a similar time of unrest, even despair. Every year we have come to expect as “normal” a festive and peaceful Christmas holiday, but the truth is that was not the case in the first Christmas and has never been the case down through the ages. We are indeed in the worst of times. That is the bad news. But we also have good news.

2. The first Christmas was a time of great anticipation and hope being realized

The best way to describe the “good news” is found in the declaration of praise by the angels as they announced the birth of Christ: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good will among men!” (Lk. 2:14) This was declared, amidst the turmoil and tension of the time, to the shepherds, simple folks who were keeping watch over their flock by night. The angels said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.” (Lk. 2:10-11)

The first thing to remember is that the birth of Christ is first and foremost to bring glory to God. This happens when the divine plan of God’s redemption that was in fact began at the fall of man after the creation, was to be fulfilled in the incarnation of the Son of God. This will bring “peace and goodwill” but it is rooted in Christ the Saviour and Lord, as His kingdom is not of this earth. Christ’s birth would therefore “bring good news of a great joy that will be for all the people.” This is demonstrated after the shepherd had visited Jesus in the manger, they returned “glorifying and praising God for all they have heard and seen, as it had been told them.” (Lk. 2:20) This was also similarly shown in the reaction of Mary (in the Magnificat) and in the words of Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist. The divine encounters with Jesus the Christ (messiah) or the news of his birth, first of all lead to the utterance of praise to God. Indeed we need to put “Christ” back into “Christ-mas” and bring glory to God.

The “good news” is qualified by “a great joy” which refers singularly and directly to the joy of the birth of Christ who is both the Saviour and Lord, the Saviour who delivers us from the bondage of sin, and the Lord (and master) who is sovereign over our lives whatever happens around us and to us. It is “for all people,” starting with the lowly shepherds on their night watch, and includes us all in the second line of blessing that was first promised and given to Abraham and his descendants. Dr. Luke emphasized in his well-researched “gospel” document of the life of Jesus that Jesus came for all those who know they are lost, even those who do not (e.g. The three parables of the lost in Luke 15.) Therein lies the “good news.” The celebration of joy is “before the angel of God over one sinner who repents.” (Lk. 15:7, 10, cf. 32)

Yes, we have bad news as we are in the worst of times. But we also have good news, and we are indeed in the best of times. May this Christmas that is not normal be the Christmas we really go back to the old old story of the birth of Jesus Christ the Saviour and Lord at the crossroad of history (from BC to AD) and crown Him with many Crowns in the New Year.

Your servant in Christ
Pastor Simon

返回「舊常態」的聖誕

親愛的列宣家弟兄姊妹，

這是最糟糕的時代，這也是最美好的時代。我借用我中學時期所讀的查爾斯·狄更斯（Charles Dickens）的《雙城記》的第一句：「這是最好的時代，這是最壞的時代，這是智慧的時代，這是愚昧...」。2020 年的聖誕不是「常態」的聖誕，有別於我們從前所經歷的。由於新冠疫症大流行，我們一直掛在口邊說我們需要接受活在「新常態」中。但對聖誕來說，我認為我們實際上是必須“返回「舊常態」”。我的意思是盼望我們將能夠重新思想第一個聖誕的真實情景。讓我們先從壞消息開始，環顧我們周圍，然後再回到好消息。

不用說由於第二波新冠疫症大流行，限聚令重新啟動及延長，許多人將不能夠像過往一般慶祝聖誕。以往許多人都會從外地趕回家過聖誕，但現在他們必須自我隔離 14 天才能與家人朋友見面，並且當他們回到自己的地方又必須同樣隔離 14 天。假期(vacation)實質成為本地渡假(staycation)。一年一度的聖誕燈飾似乎黯然失色，街上和商場裡人流稀少，無法營造以往的節日氣氛，原本充斥著歡樂氣氛的聖誕歌聲都變得冷清孤寂。我們真的能夠高唱「普世歡騰」麼？我們不會有以往的實體聖誕崇拜，也不會有報佳音。更不會見到商場裡人頭湧湧爭取在最後一刻瘋狂地搶購禮物送給摯愛的家人和朋友。許多聖誕老人將會失業！聖誕假期過後，可能會有許多商店關門倒閉，因為實在太多人轉向在網上購物。每個人（至少大多數人）都會像歷代的疫症大流行時期一樣配戴口罩。這確實不是我們每年在這個時候一直期待的「歡樂」聖誕。我們正處於最糟糕的時代！

但這也許實際上是一件好事。我嘗試將今年我們的聖誕與新冠疫症一起反思，回顧真正「返回」第一個聖誕及其當時的景象，現今所有的教堂傳統和商業化使聖誕成為一個「節日假期」，將「基督」(Christ) 摒棄出「聖誕」(Christmas)。也許拆毀這些聖誕外表的裝飾，我們才能夠重新察驗並真正慶祝這「節日」(season)的真確「原因」(reason)。因此，讓我們返回和重新體驗基督在伯利恆城降生的第一個聖誕的情景：

1. 第一個聖誕是一個政治動盪和社會局勢緊張的時代

首先，當時以色列的猶太人是處於羅馬政府的統治下，羅馬政府要進行戶口登記，迫使他們要返回自己的出生地（路 2:1-7）。他們雖不願意但也不得不照樣遵行，他們就各歸各城去了。這也是約瑟和馬利亞要從加利利往伯利恆的經歷，儘管當時馬利亞的產期已到而耶穌會隨時出生，他們仍迫不得已也要踏上旅途。他們到達伯利恆的時候已不早，兼且有許多人同時在旅途路上，故此「客店裡沒有地方！」（路 2:7）。結果耶穌便降生在馬槽裡。

使徒馬太（太 2:1-18）為我們記錄了另一段可怕的事件，基督降生後不久，有三位博士從東方前來尋找耶穌的故事。「傀儡王」希律非常害怕自己的政權會發生什麼變化，他密謀關心三博士的消息，聲稱他們尋找到「那生下來作猶太人的王」時，就「好叫我也去拜他。」（2:8b）其實是要謀害耶穌。故事以滅絕慘劇結束，伯利恆所有兩歲以下的男童慘被屠殺。約瑟和馬利亞與小耶穌被迫逃亡到埃及暫住！

因此，我們可以看到第一個聖誕不但完全沒有任何節日歡樂的氣氛，而且是充滿了恐懼和焦慮，當時羅馬帝國由一個非常沒有自信的「傀儡」王執政，人民生活在他的殘酷和暴虐的統治中。今天，我們同樣生活在戰亂，貧困、政治動盪、種族分離和道德墮落的世界；新冠肺炎疫症使情況變本加厲，病毒感染大流行導致全球陷入經濟危機。雖然第一聖誕與今日造成困擾的原因有所不同，但我們絕對是處於同樣的不安，甚至絕望的時代。每年我們都期待著一個「常態」的節日和

平安的聖誕假期，但事實上第一個聖誕並非如此，至今也一直陷於不同的動盪中。我們確實處於最壞的時代。那是壞消息。但我們也有好消息。

2. 第一個聖誕是充滿期待和盼望的時代

描述「好消息」最好的方式是天使宣佈基督降生時的頌讚宣言：「在至高之處，**榮耀歸與神！在地上，平安歸與他所喜悅的人！**」（路 2:14）。正當政治動盪和緊張的時代，天使向那些在夜間看守羊群的牧羊人宣告說：「不要怕！看哪！我報給你們大喜的信息，是關於萬民的：今天在大衛的城裡，為你們生了救主，就是主基督。」（路 2:10-11）。

我們要切切緊記基督的降生是要榮耀上帝，這是首要的事實。上帝救贖的神聖計劃實際上是在創造之初人類墮落時已展開，由上帝之兒子耶穌基督完成。這「平安與仁愛」是源於救主基督上帝，因為祂的國度不在這個世界。因此，基督的降生是如此宣佈「我報給你們大喜的信息，是關於萬民的。」，牧羊人在馬槽裡拜訪耶穌之後，就證實了這一點，「牧人因為聽見的和看見的，正像天使對他們所說的一樣，就回去了，把**榮耀讚美歸與神。**」（路 2:20）。馬利亞的回應（尊主頌）和施洗約翰之父撒迦利亞的說話也證明了這一點。與耶穌基督（彌賽亞）神聖的相遇或宣告祂降生的消息，首要的是讚美神。確實，我們需要將「基督」(Christ)放回「聖誕」(Christ-mas)裡面，並將榮耀歸給上帝。

「好消息」被表彰為「極大的喜樂」，直接指向基督的降生帶來之喜樂，基督既是救主又是上帝，救贖我們脫離罪惡的捆綁，上帝（和主宰）擁有我們生命一切的主權。這是給「萬民」的，從夜間看守羊群卑微的牧羊人開始，並將我們所有人都包括在祝福的行列裡，這是最初應許給亞伯拉罕和他的後裔的。路加醫生在他的「福音書」記載有關耶穌生平裡強調指出，耶穌來是要尋找那些失喪的人，甚至那此不曉得的（例如，路加福音 15 章三個迷失的比喻）。這是「好消息」。歡喜快樂的慶祝是「因為一個罪人悔改，神的使者也必這樣為他歡喜。」（路 15:7,10,參 32）。

是的，我們有壞消息，因為我們處於最糟糕的時代。但是，我們也有好消息，而且我們確實處於最好的時代。讓我們真正返回那古舊的故事，救主耶穌基督降生的歷史交叉點（從公元前到公元後），使這個聖誕成為不一樣的聖誕，並在新的一年擁戴祂為王。

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