

## ***A Very Messy Christmas Christmas***

by Rev. Robert Griffith

*“And while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born. And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. And she wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:6-7)*

But why? Why did it happen like that? Why all this? Why are you here? Why do millions of people still gather like this across the world today to recount a very strange story. Familiarity, much loved songs, nativity pageants and Christmas cheer have sanitised and even romanticised this story – but take off all the colourful Christmas wrapping and we find a very strange, illogical and somewhat messy story - but a story which still stops the world on this day every year and perhaps its in the midst of the messy that we find the miraculous.

Who would have thought, in this modern, enlightened, intellectual, technological age that mature people would still be recounting with wonder this story about some nobodies from nowhere thousands of years ago in a place most of us will never see!? A story who’s central character is a baby who says nothing and does nothing other than just be born in a messy barn or cave or stable – none of us know for sure what it was ... but it was messy! Why do we still do this?

Well I hope your presence here today indicates you already know why, but just in case you’ve forgotten, just in case this annual pilgrimage has become more of an ‘ought to’ than a ‘want to,’ just in case the reason for this season has been overwhelmed by everything else this crazy world dumps on us every December, let me remind you of the world-changing, life-transforming power and truth which lies at the heart of this very special day.

God had this messy plan - a plan to save mankind from our own stupidity and rebellion, and to do that He was going to send His Son. Where does the God of the universe send His only Son? Where does the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords come? To a barn ... a stable ... a manger ... a feeding trough of all places! Certainly no place fit for a king. But then again, this wasn’t any ordinary king.

When I say it was messy, I mean it was messy. It was a barn, a stable. So you’ve got animals and animal stuff ... you know, manure, mud and smell. A pitiful place for any person to be born, much less the King of Kings! Why would God do that? Well, I can’t tell you for sure, because the prophet Isaiah tells us that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways. There’s an element of mystery in many of the things God has done.

But that same prophet Isaiah said *“All we like sheep have gone astray, each of us have turned to our own way and the Lord has laid on Him (this baby in the smelly barn) the sins of us all.”* (Isaiah 53:6) You see, Jesus came to a messy place. A barn, well, yes that’s messy. But he also came to a very messy world.

Why? Because this ‘Good Shepherd’ was coming to take care of His sheep and to make a way for His sheep to go home. And how does a shepherd do that? He lives where the sheep live, he sleeps where they sleep and he eats where they eat. Now later in His life, that got Jesus into trouble. But why did Jesus eat with the sinners and hang around with the no-hopers? Because that’s what a shepherd does – he leaves none behind.

So an angel appeared to the shepherds in the field and said *"This will be a sign to you. You will find the babe wrapped in cloth lying in a manger."* A sign. Do you ever wonder what that sign was? A sign for what? Maybe it was a sign that Jesus is accessible to everyone. A sign that the God who owns the cattle on a thousand hills can relate to a homeless person. Because for the final years of Jesus' life and ministry, He was homeless. He never had a place to rest his head.

Maybe it was a sign that God would not relate to the social status of men and woman in any way. A sign that He detests the 'splendour' of humans, because even our best is not worthy of His majesty, greatness, power, and love.

So perhaps entering our world through a dirty, messy barn full of animals said more about God than we ever imagined. God becoming human to redeem all humans is what we call the incarnation – *Emmanuel* – 'God with us' and it was an amazing sign all those years ago. But it's also a sign for us today – right here in our own part of the world and in this chapter of our earthly journey – a sign that we should follow our Lord in this incarnational ministry.

In fact, the apostle Paul would later write in his letter to the Church in Philippi, that *"we should have the same attitude of Jesus Christ, who being in the very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, becoming a servant, being made in human likeness."* (Phil. 2:5-7)

You see, being a servant is messy and Jesus set this incredible example for us. He didn't just start His earthly journey like this ... He remained in 'servant' mode His whole life. At one point we find the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe on His knees washing the filthy feet of those He came to save. The God of the universe, the God who deserved the best of everything - on his knees – washing tinea, dirt and cow dung off the feet of those who should be on their face worshipping Him. Now that is messy ... but it's also beautiful.

He's the God who came right into our world and was laid in a manger, a feeding trough of all places. Why such a messy place? Because he was following a messy plan to redeem God's precious children who had gotten themselves into a right royal mess since those precious days back in the Garden of Eden when we would walk with God in the cool of the evening and enjoy unencumbered intimacy, love and harmony with each other and with our God.

So needless to say that very first Christmas was dirty; it was grimy; it was filthy. But we must thank God this morning that it was, because without that messy plan, without God's messy entrance into humanity - we would all be in a much, much bigger mess right now! The reason this story still stops the world this day, is because the reality beneath this story is the only hope for humanity ... and I mean the ONLY hope. Let me pray with you ...

God of every nation and people, from the beginning of Creation You have made known your love through the gift of your Son Who bears the name Emmanuel, "God with Us." In the fullness of time the Christ-child came to be the Good News to all humankind. Emmanuel, God lives with us as one of us; Christ, the Word made flesh, has come to us as a vulnerable, weak and dependent baby; A God who hungered and thirsted, and longed for human touch and affection; A God who chose to be born in obscurity and shame, to a virgin, an unwed maiden, with a dirty stable as his first home and a borrowed manger as a bed, in a tiny, insignificant town called Bethlehem.

Oh, Mighty God, of humble origins, Christ, the Messiah, whom the prophets foretold, You were born at a time, and in a place where very few welcomed you or even recognized you. Have we also lost that sense of joy and anticipation in what the Christ-child may bring?

Have we been preoccupied with endless activities, distracted by the cares of this world; living as though this life is all there is and there's nothing more beyond this; so busy that there's no room in our cluttered lives to welcome Christ when He comes to us – not just on this Christmas day, but every day?

Lord God, help us to remove whatever hinders us from receiving the gifts which our Saviour desires to bring: Joy, peace, justice, mercy, grace, forgiveness, love, reconciliation with You and eternity in Your wonderful presence. These are the gifts we are to receive freely, but then also share with the downtrodden, the oppressed, the outcasts, the weak, the defenceless, but also the comfortable, the rich, the self-assured and the blessed. Their need of Christ is all the same.

Lord Jesus, You are the hope of all peoples, the wisdom Who teaches and guides us, the wonderful Counsellor Who encourages and consoles, the Prince of Peace Who calms our troubled minds and restless spirits - giving us true inner peace beyond anything human.

Lord Jesus, You are the radiant dawn, so shine on those who live in darkness and in the shadows, dispel fears, anxieties, and insecurities, restore hearts that have grown cold and distant, enlighten minds which have become darkened through greed, anger, hatred and bitterness. We remember today those who are living in shadows of a marginal existence, we pray for the homeless, jobless and those struggling to keep their lives together.

We lift up families, especially the children who may not experience the joy of Christmas celebrations today. Especially the families of those killed on the roads or the many victims of crime who have had their lives cut short by the brutal actions of others. Today will be so hard. Lord, we pray for the many thousands of families around the world for whom this Christmas will be more painful than pleasant because hatred, war and evil has robbed them of loved ones.

We pray also for those living alone, the widowed, the orphans, the elderly, the sick and bedridden, for whom Christmas may be more of a reminder of what they once had, but have no more. Comfort them and encourage them today.

Lord God, as we wait for the dawn of the coming of the Christ again, we do so with anticipation of new and unexpected challenges. Like Mary, we sense the birth pangs of a new era for this Church and the whole Body of Christ across this nation, a new chapter in Your unfolding kingdom purposes - waiting to be born. May we, like Mary, be filled with courage, openness, and receptivity, to be the bearers of the Christ-child in receiving and bringing forth the Good News of Your grace and favour and forgiveness. As we walk along the path of peace, as we are strengthened in our love for Jesus and for each other, may we be encouraged and fortified once more by the words of Isaiah:

*"Arise, shine, for your light has come. The glory of the LORD has risen upon you. Even though darkness shall cover the earth and over its people, Yet the LORD will be your everlasting light."*  
(Isaiah 60:1-2)

In Jesus' name, may it be so. Amen.