

St Botolph's Church Worthing
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2016 years ago – give or take a year or two – a baby was born in poor circumstances in an obscure little Jewish town in a remote province of the Roman empire. Nothing very special about that, you might say: but today hundreds of millions of people are celebrating the birth of that baby. Why? The answer is, because that baby God was keeping his promise.

You might wonder: what promise? To answer that, we must go back to the very dawn of history, for God created this world and it was good. But something went wrong and that something was human sin. The Bible in its earliest chapters recounts sin – Adam and Eve disobeyed God, Cain murdered his brother Abel, and so it went on. God tried several times to put it right: his most drastic solution was to destroy all of sinful humanity in a flood and save one good man – Noah and his family. But sadly Noah's sons were not as good as their father and the whole round of sin started again. So God called on another righteous man, Abraham, promising him that through his descendants all the nations of the earth would be blessed. But Abraham was impatient and would not wait for God's good time.

So everything fell apart again and, as you read the Old Testament this is a repeated pattern. God sent Moses to give his people a Law, but they did not keep it. He sent great leaders like Joshua and Samuel but still things went wrong: God chose David to be King over his people and, despite David's many failings, God made a promise to him. The start of that promise was kept when Jesus was born. God promised David 'Your house and your Kingdom shall endure forever before me, your throne shall be established forever'. And in the centuries that followed God referred this promise through his prophets to show that one day a child would be born from the family of David who would also be God's own anointed son. This child, it was prophesied, would both die to bear the sins of many and would also reign in justice and righteousness forever more. This was God's answer to sin. God's people waited through many long years for this promise to be fulfilled and for this child to be born. Somehow it is very symbolic of the state of sin into which the world had fallen that, when the time came, there was no room for him at the inn. Also that he was born in a stable and that the only people who recognised him at his birth were shepherds – the humblest and poorest of the people: and that the King, rather than rejoicing that God's promise had come true at last, tried to kill him and forced him and his family to flee to a foreign land.

Sin was still very powerful, but God's promise had been kept and the world was changed on that far off night in Bethlehem. We know from reading the Gospels in the New Testament how hard it was for Jesus when he had grown up to proclaim God's good news and his desire to forgive all past wrongs – so hard that it brought Jesus to death on the cross. But by God's power he was dying to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies that sins could be forgiven and then rising from the dead to show that God's new great promise was true: that, for those who believe, death is not the end but a gateway to eternal life with God.

So Christmas is all about promises – the ancient promise to David that was fulfilled when Jesus was born and the promise that God gives us through Jesus: that faith in him opens the way for us to eternal life. We stand between these two promises and we are called today and every day to obey Jesus' very simple words: "Thou shall love the Lord your God and you shall love your neighbour as yourself" That's what Jesus did. It was the power behind his life and it can be the power behind ours. Just to remind us how great that power is, let's end with an anonymous quote that is well known but bears repeating:

- He was born in an obscure village
- He worked in a carpenter's workshop until he was about thirty
- He was then an itinerant preacher
- He never held office
- He never had a family or owned a house
- He didn't go to college
- He had no credentials but himself

After preaching for three years

- The public turned against him
- His friends ran away
- He was turned over to his enemies and went through a show trial
- He was nailed to a cross between two thieves
- While he was dying his executioners gambled for his clothing, the only property he had on earth
- He was laid in a borrowed grave

Twenty centuries have come and gone

- Today he is the central figure of the human race
- All the armies that ever marched,
- All the navies that ever sailed
- All the parliaments that ever sat
- All the Kings that ever reigned

Have not affected the life of humankind as much as Jesus' solitary life
What a way for God to fulfil a promise!

AMEN