**Sermon Christmas Day @ Stowe 2022**

I want to start by talking about a trend in society today that is not very Christmassy but relevant. We are living through a troubled combative time and when someone in public, particularly political, life is given a new job others, those who might oppose them or be jealous, dig back in to the past looking for things that have been said or done that will make their opponent’s life difficult. Facebook, Twitter and other websites store things that people have said that they might regret and can destroy reputations. People want to know where someone comes from, what were their parents like, are they who they appear to be? I read in a book written about 45 years ago “*the incorrigible cynicism of the world would have us believe that to keep one’s heroes on, we must keep them at arm’s length.”* In other words one can’t believe anything.

If this is true about people who have become important let’s recognise that you don’t get more important than Jesus. This is why we have the history about Jesus’ parents and his birth. People today want to know where he came from and what his early life was like.

The Christmas story of Mary and the angel Gabriel, Joseph’s dreams, the journey to Bethlehem, the birth in a stable, the visit of angels to the shepherds and their visit to the stable, the visit of the Wise Men is amazing. If it was in a work of fiction you would say it was far too unlikely. But it is the documented start of a completely amazing, unpredictable story.

But there is a bigger, more important dimension to this story. What was happening on a cosmic scale? Jesus, born to poor parents in poor Bethlehem was the Son of the God; the same God who created everything; our world, our environment and us, you and me and created Jesus as a human being. So this Christmas I want us to think about what God’s objectives were that led to the birth of Jesus. And there is a theme that I think runs through the first Christmas; a theme that can be summed up in two words. God loves – and he wants us to know it.

We want the background story. We have writings from way before Jesus’ birth that are the ancient equivalent of Facebook, twitter and the others and they predicted what Jesus was going to be like before he was born. Some parts of the Old Testament tell us that although he was God’s Son and therefore he was potentially as all powerful and all knowing as the God who created Him, although he could have been powerful, strong, rich, in control of everyone, he was going to be the opposite – he was going to be the servant of everyone who took him seriously. Why? Because God loves.

Jesus’ objective was to show what his father was like. He wanted to bring peace and stability to everyone who chose to follow him. He was not going to do this by being powerful within his society, because that would be temporary and not last, but would do it by teaching, by healing by showing his love, by relating to everyone; even to those who hated him. Why? Because it’s the foundation of God’s plan for his child and for the world - because God loves.

Let’s look at our Christmas crib scene and see what it tells us about Jesus’ first few days and months. We can see Mary and Joseph. They were not rich or entitled. Joseph worked for his living in a small village and did not earn much money. No status there. Joseph was forced by Roman decree to travel to Bethlehem where his ancestors came from. He took Mary and they probably walked. Joseph had to go but why did Mary go? We don’t know but let me guess that it was because of hostility to Mary because she was expecting a baby and was not married and it was not obvious who the father was. She went because Joseph loved her and protected her.

When they got to Bethlehem the place was packed and there was no room for them. In our crib scene we can see animals and we all know that Mary gave birth to Jesus in a stable and they had no bed for the baby so they put him into a manger. They experienced a tough time but were cared for because God loved.

Who else can we see in the stable? We can see the shepherds. They were far from being posh people. They lived out in the open even when the weather was cold and wet. They were smelly from their sheep and dirty. But they were chosen to see God’s Son before anyone else because God loves all people. How did they know about Jesus? They were told by an angel who gave that wonderful message. ‘*Don’t be afraid. I’m bringing you good news of great joy for everyone’.* Why were they joyful? Because God loved them. And the second part of the message from a host of angels who praised God, well they knew what was happening, saying ‘*Glory to God and peace to men on whom his favour rests*.’ Why did the angels give the message? Because God wanted them to; because he loves them.

There are some more visitors who are not yet in the crib scene Who are they?

The wise men, the magi. They were men who did not worship the Jewish Yahweh but their own gods – probably the sun. They brought gifts for the baby. Why did they come? To show that Jesus was for everyone – because God loved them.

So to the followers of Facebook and Twitter this is the answer to their question ’Where did this person come from? What sort of background did he have?’ The answer is firstly he had a very loving caring family background. Secondly he was a very special baby who was protected and cared for by his celestial father because he loved his Son.

Why did this story happen at all? Because God wanted it to happen even though his son was born into a difficult dangerous time when his life was constantly at risk – a time not so very different from what people in many parts of the world experience. But underlying the entire Christmas story is the creator God who wanted this birth to happen in a downbeat, unnoticed way that would show that power and control and riches are not what are important to our loving God who wants us to have true loving relationships with those close to us and those far away should be number one priority for us all.

Because God loves and we should follow Him. AMEN