

## **SERMON: Sunday – 25 December 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **But it's Christmas**

(Based on an idea for a sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells)

Luke 2:1-20

A British preacher went to visit the United States. She'd prepared a careful three-point sermon on the subject of the word 'But.' No one told her that in America 'butt' means 'backside.' So she embarked on the first point of her sermon, 'Everyone has a but'. She was a little confused by the congregation's response. Undeterred, she carried on to her second point: 'You can see other people's butts.' The congregation didn't seem to be getting her argument. There was nothing to be done but to carry on to her third and most significant point, 'But you can't see your own but.'

The story of Christmas is one in which almost every character has a 'but.' It starts with Zechariah. Zechariah's a priest of the Temple in Jerusalem. There are so many priests that each group only gets to serve two weeks a year, and when a group's performing the morning and evening sacrifices they draw lots for which of their number will also make the incense offerings. Zechariah's name is drawn, and in he goes to the sanctuary. There he meets Gabriel, the angel of the Lord, who announced that he, Zechariah, will have a son named John, who will make ready a people for the Lord. The way Luke tells the story, it reminds us of Abraham and Elkanah, two old men in the Old Testament who had sons according to God's promise, Isaac and Samuel. But it turns out Zechariah has a very big 'But': 'But I'm too old'. Zechariah's 'but' is that he can't believe God still has a use for an old man like him.

Then there's Joseph. Just as in Luke's account an angel appears to Zechariah, so in Matthew's account an angel appears to Joseph. Joseph knows he's of the lineage of David, the family from whom the messiah was expected to come. He also knows his fiancée's pregnant. What he finds it difficult to believe is that the father of the child was the Holy Spirit. Like a lot of people, Joseph's more than a little concerned with the gossip in the village, at the shops, in the offices, on the workshop floor. It's not a nice situation to be in, planning to marry a young woman and suddenly discovering that she's expecting a baby, and knowing the baby isn't yours. Joseph's a kind and good man, and doesn't get angry or humiliate Mary. Which of us would have been as generous as he? But Joseph's nonetheless a man with a very big 'but.' 'But what will people say?' He can square it in his own imagination, but he struggles to see how others will do so.

Then we move to a third character, who doesn't appear in the scriptural story but who has become the stuff of every nativity play performed ever since. I refer to the innkeeper. Luke gives us a simple line 'she laid him in a manger, because there was no room at the inn.' Out of this line we have created endless sequences of grumpy innkeepers, menageries of farm animals, beds of straw, and little donkeys. But the innkeeper, fictional or not, is someone we can all relate to. This character is forever remembered as a person who's so preoccupied with the cares of his world that they had no room for Jesus. A person with a big but: 'But I'm too busy'.

And then there are the wise men. They are sages, magi, astrologers. They've been consulting the skies for a long time. They have a deep understanding of the mysteries of the universe. They've discovered a special star, a star that heralds the birth of a new king, a king whose influence matters not just on earth but also in heaven. They travel afar, bearing gifts. But then they face a crisis of faith and wisdom. They assume that the king of the Jews must be born in Jerusalem. These are very clever, very courageous and very patient men. But they have a big but: 'But the Son of God can't be born in a stable in a small insignificant town'.

So here are four characters from the Christmas story: four characters who each have a big but: but I'm too old, but what will people say, but I'm too busy, but this isn't the God I'd expected.

There are other characters that see things differently. One is Elizabeth. Elizabeth is Zechariah's wife. She's past her best-before date. Her hopes of having a child seem to be over. She could say 'But I'm too old'. But it seems she didn't. Instead she says, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me'.

Another character's Mary. This must have been a terrifying time for her. Having a child is a daunting prospect at the best of times, but just imagine being a young girl swept up into God's destiny and facing the misunderstanding of your whole community. Mary could have had lots of big buts: 'But I'm too young', 'But I'm too scared', 'But why me?' We can hardly blame her for saying, 'But I'm a virgin.' But Mary leaves all the buts to one side, and when Gabriel tells what God has in store she simply responds, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord.'

Finally there are the shepherds. Of all the characters in the story, these have the biggest reason to find a but. The life of a shepherd was a hard one. Not only did they spend most of their life far from the comforts and company of home; even worse, the fact that they were incapable of keeping the ritual and dietary standards of the Jewish law meant that they were regarded as unclean and therefore outside God's favour. Alone of all the characters in the Christmas story, they have not the slightest hint of a but. They don't say 'But

we are only shepherds.’ All they say is, ‘Let us go now and see this thing that has taken place.’ They put their livelihoods in danger by leaving their sheep in the field, and they put what little reputation they have in jeopardy by telling the whole community what they had heard and seen. For the shepherds, there’s no but: simply celebration and thanksgiving.

As we look at our lives on Christmas Day, and take away the wrapping paper of nostalgia and sentimentality, the question for us is, where do we fit into this story? Do we have a big but – but I’m too old, but what will people say, but I’m too busy, but this isn’t the God I expected, but how can this be? Or are we like the shepherds, a little scared, but eager to respond to whatever new thing God has in store?

The heart of Christmas is the word Emmanuel, God with us. The good news of the Christmas story is that God finds a way to be with us, despite our buts. Finds a way to be with Zechariah by giving him a hopeful wife. Finds a way to be with Joseph by speaking to him in a dream. Finds a way to be with the innkeeper by coming in the back door. Finds a way to be with the wise men by sending them scurrying back to their books of prophecy. God finds a way to be with us whether we say ‘But...but...but’ or not. And that’s because, when it comes to being with us, God doesn’t have a but. That’s the theology of Christmas. So we don’t need a but. That’s the ethics. Happy Christmas.