



God continues to break into history today just as in Bethlehem

**It's not always easy to spot God at work but we should look to the climate change and #MeToo movements, in fact wherever light is being shone in dark situations, says Archbishop Geoff Smith, Primate of the Anglican Church in Australia**

One of the clear features of the accounts in the Bible of the birth of Jesus is that the writers are at pains to say: the birth of Jesus is an event in history. A real event at a real time.

So, for instance tonight's reading from the gospel according to St Luke starts off: 'in those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria'.

The point is that the birth of Jesus happened at a real time in history. Details are provided to set the event among other historical events and people. The birth of Jesus happened at a real time in human history. Here is God coming among us as one of us at a moment in history-when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

God came among us because God loves the whole world. The people part and the non- people part of creation. God loved the world so much that he came among us in the baby Jesus for the salvation of

the world.

God has a plan. Right from the start God had a plan for the world. A plan for its salvation. A plan for its healing and new creation. A plan that the world, its people and the whole creation would flourish and be full of life and justice and freedom, at peace with God and at peace with each other. 'Salvation' is a short-hand way of describing that reality.

This is God's plan, this is God's purpose and he was beginning to bring it to be in the birth of Jesus. Immanuel. God with us. God was not bringing salvation by remote control. It's not like sitting on the lounge and changing channels with the remote. God was getting involved in the life of the world. At a time. In a place.

In the real world. And we celebrate that engagement that is Christmas, the love that motivated it, and we hope for its fulfilment.

I think that the Christmas celebration is wonderful, but I wonder whether we might be missing something. It's very easy while we celebrate Christmas as an event in history, to consign it to history. The birth of Jesus is back there, 2000 years ago. All very well.

Yes, a sign of God's love – back there. God among us – back there. But not a lot of relevance in the here and now.

But what if God is continuing to break into history now as God did in Bethlehem?

It's important to remember what God's purpose is. What God's aim is. What God's mission is. The birth of Jesus was not an end in itself but the beginning of something.

God's mission, God's aim is for the whole creation to flourish. So that things are different to the way they are now. Right now there is much that is good and fine and beautiful in the world but there is much that's not. There is sickness and natural disaster, injustice, war and cruelty.

God's aim, God's purpose for the whole world is life and love and connection and healing and freedom. We see glimpses of God's purpose in the life and ministry of Jesus which is the point.

What if God is continuing to act in our history now to bring his purposes to reality? So the saving activity of God is not just something in the past and not just a future hope either.

Spotting God at work today means looking for movements or people or where light is being shone in dark situations.

There are two examples of things happening in the world where I think God is working to achieve his purpose of flourishing.

The first is the climate change movement.

I think some climate change activists are a bit over the top, but I think that generally God has been working through them to call the world to look after the creation.

God wants the whole creation to flourish not just the human part, so care for the environment is part of the story. But we haven't done that very well on the whole. We consume finite resources as if they will never run out. We pollute the planet, and we degrade the environment. In many places the planet is not flourishing, it is groaning.

The message of the activists has been important. God has been working through them to wake us up. We should not ignore the message.

The second example is the #metoo movement which has called out sexual abuse and sexual harassment.

The focus on bad behaviour. The focus on bad and wrong treatment of people. The focus on sexual harassment of people, mostly, but not only women, brought by the #metoo movement has been really important. This is a message our community cannot ignore. We have to change our culture so that it's crystal clear that violence and intimidation and mistreatment of people is not acceptable and not to be tolerated.

I think the #metoo movement is serving the purposes of God because it is calling out behaviour that does not lead to people's lives flourishing and being whole and full. And we should not ignore what God is saying to us.

Some people see God as being like an old man in the clouds somewhere. Real, but not doing much in our actual lives. But that's not the picture of God in the Bible, and I think we can see God at work in all sorts of ways in our present time.

It's important to remember what God's aim is—the salvation of the whole world. God in Jesus began the fulfillment of God's promises and God's purpose. And God continues to bring it to fruition. God continues to work in the real life of our world now, in the present not just in the past.

Sometimes it's not always easy to spot God at work. Because God doesn't always do what we expect. Intervening in the world via a baby, in an unimportant backwater, with shepherds as witnesses. No one expected that. But that's what God did.

Spotting God at work today means looking for movements or people or where light is being shone in dark situations. Where the truth is coming out. Where people are being connected to each other. Where peace is emerging. Where love and grace and kindness are being shown. Where there is generosity and connection with God. Where the gifts of the world are shared. Where the creation is being cared for and nurtured. Where the truth is being told not to hurt but to free.

Those are signs of the purposes of God. Those are signs of God's future coming into the present.

One of the names associated with Jesus in the stories of his birth is 'Immanuel' which we are told means "God with us", and God being with us is not restricted to the middle east 2000 years ago. God continues to be with us and continues to bring light in darkness in real situations in our real world.

This reality gives me great hope as I think about the challenges we face individually and collectively as a community. The fact that God has not forgotten us and loves us enough to continue to bring flourishing to the creation through all sorts of means is really good news not just for me but for all people. We are not alone. The future is not one of gloom and doom. God is alive and well and continues to strengthen us and help us.

We are here tonight because we have seen something of the reality of God. We have noticed what God did 2000 years ago and what God is doing now. It would be great, having seen that for us to help others to see as well. To point our neighbours and family and friends towards the saving healing helping work of God now.

It's not all history. It's not all back there when Quirinius was governor of Syria. It's now. God continues to love the whole creation. God continues to sustain the whole creation. God continues to act in the present to bring his purpose of salvation to fruition and that's worth celebrating just as much as God's actions in the past.

Whatever you experience this Christmas I hope you experience encouragement and hope for you and the world. We see God's love for the creation there in history in Bethlehem. We see God's love for creation in the reality of the world today. And we will see God continuing to bring his purpose of life and love, healing and wholeness in the future. In a world of uncertainty God's continuing loving action is one thing we can be very certain about, and depend on, and hope in.

There is much to celebrate. Have a very happy Christmas.

***This is the text of the sermon preached by Archbishop Geoff Smith, Primate of the Anglican Church in Australia, at Midnight Mass in St Peter's Cathedral Adelaide, Christmas Eve, 2021***

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