

Isaiah 9 Hidden Christmas

Tim Anderson 28/11/2021

We're starting our sermon series leading up to Christmas today.

I am shamelessly having my thoughts for this series guided by Tim Keller's book "Hidden Christmas".

There's a lot of controversy about pastors pinching material from other people who are more accomplished than them.

Some have been busted lifting whole sermons word for word.

Well I won't do that.

One reason is because I don't think you would sit still

for the hour that it would take to preach one of Tim Keller's sermons.

And some of his quotes from highbrow authors might be a bit off putting in Hastings.

I am yet to get the comment from someone

as they are walking out of church,

"Could you make the sermons a bit more intellectual, Tim?

You are treating us like dummies."

Hasn't happened yet.

Another reason I write my own is because I do actually want to put some of my own stamp on things.

But I am stealing Tim Keller's ideas and putting them in my own words.

If you want the real version,

this week it comes complete with quotes

from Vaclav Havel and Bertrand Russel,

you are welcome to read Keller's book.

Well we begin in one of the most famous Old Testament passages that prophesies about Christmas.

Isaiah 9:2 "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned."

In the Bible, darkness can mean one of two things: ignorance or evil.

Ignorance of God, not ignorance of your school work or something.

And the people in Isaiah's day were walking in darkness.

They had some problems in their nation.
The king of Assyria was about to come sweeping through
and destroy the northern kingdom.
There's nothing like feeling under threat
from a larger and more powerful nation
to make a small nation start looking for answers.
I don't know how many articles there have been in the papers recently
about the threat posed by China to Australia.
Should we get nuclear subs?
Should we be prepared to defend Taiwan if the US does?
If we are prepared to defend Taiwan, should we say so?
Should we speak out about human rights abuses in China
or mind our own business?
All of these things are debated ad nauseam in Australia at the moment.
And you can bet if the temperature gets a bit hotter,
then there will be bitter recriminations and division.
That's how life was in Israel in Isaiah's day.
They could say they were living in a land of deep darkness.
And where were the people turning shed some light on their situation?
Isaiah 8 tells us they were turning to mediums and spiritists.
If darkness is ignorance and evil,
then there is nothing darker than the occult.
And those who turn to the occult for light will be sorely disappointed.
Occult means hidden.
People looking for hidden answers.
People looking for hidden answers in evil places.
Why wouldn't you turn to God and ask him for answers?
If you were an Israelite,
you've got centuries of God's kindness to your nation to look back on.
It's absolutely nuts to think you would look elsewhere.
But people do have a habit of looking in all the wrong places.
It's no different today.

What does God do when people ignore him
and look for light in all the wrong places?
Well the remarkable thing is,

God doesn't say,
"Well you want to find enlightenment in mediums,
you are welcome to their wisdom.
I'll leave you to it,
and let's see how you get on."
That would be the instinctive response of many humans.
But it's not God's response.
On the contrary,
"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of darkness a light has dawned."
Instead of leaving them to stew in their juice,
God through the prophet Isaiah promises to send them light.

Now many people look for light from within.
If we just educate ourselves really well
and try really hard,
we'll be able to solve our problems.
We will banish ignorance and have peace and harmony.
Well how's that going, world?
I mean we are better educated than ever before.
My kids are learning stuff at school that I didn't learn until I got to uni.
We have lots of cuddly words bandied about
concerning inclusivity and tolerance.
But when push comes to shove,
have we managed to solve our problems?
I don't know too many people
who even think we are heading in that direction.
We spent 20 years and too many lives
trying to build a society that valued education and freedom
in Afghanistan
and we have just given it back to the Taliban
who will murder anyone who disagrees with them
and prevent anyone who is female from getting an education.
That sounds like darkness is on the march.
And it's a situation hardly confined to other countries.
Our own country has unparalleled levels of anxiety and depression.

We have ever higher rates of domestic abuse.
We have alarming amounts of addiction
and we just keep adding to the list of things our citizens are exposed to
that cause addiction.
200 years ago, they started the temperance movement,
because the main thing that people got addicted to was alcohol.
We still have people addicted to alcohol.
But now they also get addicted to illicit drugs, gambling, pornography,
prescription medications, computer games
and social media on their telephones.
Darkness is on the march.
We are not solving our problems seeking light from within.

But God says through Isaiah,
"On those living in the land of darkness,
a light has dawned."
The thing about dawn is that it's a light from somewhere else.
We don't generate the light ourselves.
We rely on the sun to shine in a light things up for us.
Now that meant something to the people of Isaiah's day,
and you can read about that in verses 3-5 on our reading.
But it needn't concern us today.
When prophets speak in the OT,
there are usually layers of fulfilment.
There is a partial level of fulfilment in their own day.
But that is often a foretaste of what God is going to do in the future.

Matthew writing in his gospel heard these words in Isaiah
and applied it to someone completely different.
Mt 4:16-17 "The people living in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.
From that time on, Jesus began to preach,
'Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'
Matthew says to us that Jesus is the light from God
that has dawned upon us.
This world has a problem with darkness.

It is bedevilled by ignorance of God and evil.
And this world cannot generate light on its own
to deal with the problem.
Jesus deals with the problem of ignorance of God
by revealing God in himself.
Jesus said to Philip,
John 14:9 "Don't you know me Philip,
even after I have been among you such a long time?
Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."
And Jesus deals with the problem of evil.
He paid the penalty for sin through his sacrificial death on the cross.
He will return to wipe out evil so it will be no more.
Jesus is the light from outside of ourselves
that has dawned on those walking in darkness.

Isaiah in fact has incredible insight into who the Lord Jesus really is.
When you think about today's world,
people often have extraordinarily low comprehension
about what Christmas is really about.
It's not just that Jesus is obscured at his own birthday party.
That much you can take as a given.
One of the few parts of secular celebration of Christmas
that I actually get excited about
is the decorating of houses with Christmas lights.
Most years we will go for a drive
to spy out some of the most creative decorations.
People put an extraordinary amount of time into their decorations.
But the number of stables, mangers, baby Jesus with Mary,
or any design related to the real Christmas story is alarmingly small.
Most people are very happy
to give Jesus the cold shoulder on his birthday.
But that's not the problem I'm referring to.
Suppose you asked Joe Average Australian,
what is the real reason for Christmas,
most of them would be able to tell you it's about Jesus' birthday.
Even the ones who only ever decorate with Santas and sleighs,

reindeer and elves.

They could still tell you it was actually originally about Jesus.

But if you took it a step further.

Why do we actually celebrate Jesus?

Who was he?

They'd get a bit stuck.

I don't mean they would say,

"Christians believe he was the eternal Son of God

but I don't believe that."

I mean they wouldn't be able to get past,

he was the founder of Christianity.

He was a good teacher who Christians follow.

Something anaemic like that.

But what does Isaiah describe Jesus as?

Is 9:6 "For to us a child is born,

to us a son is given,

and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor,

Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Bear in mind that Isaiah was writing 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

It's amazing to think how much clearer his vision was

than that of the world around us.

How could it be that someone who never got to see Jesus,

never got to read about him in a gospel

could know Jesus so well,

and yet those who live in a society

where you can step into almost any church

and get a reasonable understanding about who Jesus is,

you can pick up a Bible for free in our Op Shop

and read about who Jesus is,

Yet people today have little idea?

And Isaiah saw it with crystal clarity.

I guess on one hand you could say Isaiah was inspired by God,

so of course he saw things clearly.

But that doesn't explain the ignorance we see around us.

You have to conclude
that ignorance is often not due to lack of education.
It is a wilful avoidance of the truth.
People don't know because they don't want to know.
If they did know,
the knowledge would force them to act.
They don't want to act.
So they make sure they don't find out.
The true meaning of Christmas is hidden from many
because they want it to be hidden.
How do we respond to that?

I think we still put the true meaning of Christmas out there.
God works through the presentation of his truth.
But we should not be surprised or alarmed
when people are wilfully ignorant
and choose to ignore the true meaning of Christmas.

But for those who want to know.
Here is the true meaning of Christmas.
Jesus is the Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God,
the Everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace.
Jesus is the Mighty God and the Everlasting Father.
No one who met him said,
"He's so inspiring.
He makes me want to lead a better life."
No. You kneel before him and worship.
We don't celebrate Christmas.
We're lost in wonder, love and praise -
To quote the hymn "love divine, all loves excelling".
If Jesus is the Mighty God, you must serve him completely.
There are no half measures.

But if Jesus is the Wonderful Counsellor and the Prince of Peace,
then you should want to serve him.
A counsellor is someone who listens to you

and knows what you are going through.

As the writer to the Hebrews put it.

Heb 4:15 "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet he did not sin."

The best sort of counsellor is someone who's been through what you are going through themselves. The message of Christmas is that we worship a God who has done that.

If Jesus is the prince of peace,
then he is the one who can solve
all of the problems of hostility in our world.
People fight about such silly stuff.
We've all fought about silly stuff.
Started arguments that just were not worth fighting.
They all seem important to us at the time.
But when you get a bit of perspective,
hopefully you can see that it was wrangling over trivia.
The Prince of Peace can solve those problems.
And not just the trivial conflicts.
Jesus can sort out the big fat ones too.
Did we treat the indigenous people badly?
Yes we did.
And Jesus can bring peace
between indigenous and non indigenous Australians.
Did we say when I was a kid
that there could never be peace in Northern Ireland?
But Jesus can bring peace.
Not just make me feel peaceful in the middle of a storm,
but actually calm the storm.
Objective peace.
And of course most importantly
that's about peace between humanity and the God who created us.
There will be no other peace

without getting that fundamental peace sorted.
That's how the message of Christmas connects to the message of Easter.

So the true meaning of Christmas is that Jesus is the Wonderful
Counsellor, the Mighty God,
the Everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace.

Jesus is the gift that is offered to every person on earth at Christmas.

9:6 "For to us a child is born, to us a son in given."

Given, see it's a gift.

A present from God to us.

But like all presents, this one needs to be received.

Imagine you are unwrapping your presents this Christmas.

The first present is a book on dieting.

Hmm, what exactly are they saying about me?

The second one is another book.

This time the title is 'Overcoming Selfishness'.

Happy Christmas!

These gifts might be hard to receive.

They may indeed be very helpful.

The authors may have excellent wisdom
for dealing with two of life's problems.

But to feel happy about receiving that wisdom,
you have to be prepared to acknowledge that there's a problem.

Jesus is a present like that.

To receive the Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father,
and Prince of Peace, you have to admit that you need him.

You have to admit that you are not someone
who can pull yourself together and live a moral and good life,
one that will stand up before God on Judgement Day.

You have to accept you need Jesus.

Ultimately, that's why so many people have trouble
recognising the true meaning of Christmas.

Recognising the true meaning of Christmas
means swallowing your pride.

And that is hard to do.

I can't save myself.

I need a light to dawn on me from outside.
A light that will reveal my ignorance of God
and my struggle against him.
And I need to receive a gift from God to overcome that problem.
God's gift is the Wonderful Counsellor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.
We need to receive God's gift at Christmas,
even if it's humiliating to admit that we need it.