

## WHY CHRIST CAME

Luke 4:16-21, Isaiah 61:1-3 (NASB)

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The following story is from chapter six of one of my unpublished books. It is the story of Mick and Christine Ragsdale, a rich and famous rock star and his wife. They began as working class kids, and when Mick made it big they skyrocketed upward together. And then the lifestyle began killing them and destroying their marriage. They both fell into drug abuse, and Mick fell into serial adulteries with fans and groupies. When Christine discovered this, she threw him out of their sumptuous mansion outside of London.

And then, at rock bottom, the Lord began to work. Christine was led to Christ by her son's nanny. Mick had an appointment with God on a park bench in the cold while drunk. Neither knew the other had believed in Christ when they met by "accident" while shopping for Christmas trees. And in a spirit of great personal need they decided to go to Christmas Eve service together. We pick up the story there.

### THEIR FIRST NOEL

Rochester, New York, 9 December, 2002

Pastor Dennis was in a funk. It was five o'clock on Christmas Eve. The heat was turned on, the sparse decorations were in place, the service was set to start at seven o'clock, and Dennis had no idea what he was going to say. There was nothing difficult about the story of Jesus' birth. He could always do the main story in the usual way and he had no doubt God would bless it. But on this Christmas Eve he stared out the window of the modern brick building, watched the snow fall, and felt that he was caught in the grip of events beyond his control.

Dennis was not one given to whims or fancies in the pursuit of ministry. The congregation at Eastgate Evangelical Church had called him because he was committed to the preaching and teaching of the Bible. And tonight's service would be no exception. But which text, and why? Dennis decided he did not have to know why but he needed to know what. He lofted a prayer concerning his need to the most high God and promptly fell asleep.

Dennis startled at the sound of a car door slamming. With alarm he looked at his watch: six forty-five! He ran to the front door of the church, unlocked it, and swung it open to a small group of familiar faces waiting in the cold. There were a few new faces, mostly family members who came on holidays. He greeted each one warmly: "Good to see you! Glad you came! How's that bad knee? and Merry Christmas!" He meant every word.

When the group had filed in Dennis noticed a black stretch limousine idling at the curb. *Who could this be?* he wondered. Dennis did not know any evangelical Christians in Great Britain who rode around in limos. A sharply-dressed chauffeur jumped out and opened the back door. Out popped a shapely leg which was followed by the rest of a beautiful young woman in a sable designer fur. Next out the door, gripping her hand, was a handsome young boy in a miniature suit. Then came a

conservatively-dressed woman with a peaceful expression. Last to emerge was a tall man with long hair dressed like an undertaker from the eighteen hundreds.

As they entered the church they introduced themselves. "I'm Christine and this is Justin," said the woman in the fur. Dennis shook the little boy's hand.

"Hello, I'm Susan," said the peaceful-looking woman.

And looking rather sheepish, the man in the undertaker suit grasped Dennis' hand: "I'm Mick."

They all stood there looking at him as if they expected him to respond in a certain way. "Welcome!" was all he said. "The service is about to start."

As they walked down the aisle and sat in the very first row, Dennis saw Mick lean down and whisper: "He doesn't know who we are!"

The piano began with the introductory strains of The First Noel. They sang more carols, read the Scriptures on the Christmas story, and then Dennis got up to speak. Normally he had very modest expectations for the Christmas Eve service, yet he had prayed and prepared as diligently as ever. In fact, he was over-prepared for this service. He had brought into the pulpit not only a message he had prepared for this year but two from previous years as well. All were good messages, all were the word of God, and God would bless any one of them. But which one? He looked out at the little band of hearty believers, ranged along the back pews as usual.

But this year what looked like an Academy Awards entourage was front and center, looking quite unfamiliar with the surroundings. In a moment of time which seemed to stretch into minutes but which was no doubt only a few seconds he looked into every face in that front row. Of the four of them were two who pierced his shepherd's heart. It was as if the Great Shepherd within him wanted to leap out of his heart and begin applying the oil of healing to these two immediately. He read pain there, injury, and a level of brokenness he had rarely seen. He also read a sense of purpose there. They had not just wandered in. Dennis knew that this night would not be merely another nice Christmas Eve service. It was to be a pivot point in the spiritual universe.

Dennis quickly put all of his prepared messages away and opened the Bible to Isaiah 61 where he had done his devotional that morning. "What's Christmas really all about?" he began. "Why did Christ really come? Isaiah explained it in a prophecy given centuries before Jesus was born: **'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, /Because the Lord has anointed Me to bring good news to the afflicted; /He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted...'**"

"That would be us," Mick mumbled under his breath. Tears rolled down Christine's face. That night every word the pastor spoke was to Mick and Christine the very voice of their heavenly Father ministering grace and healing.

"How did he know about us?" Christine asked Susan in a whisper as they filed out.

Again they stood before Pastor Dennis at the door, but with new eyes of wonder that God would speak to them through someone they had never met. "Just visiting?" Dennis asked, still not recognizing these royals of British rock music.

"Not any more," Christine replied in a voice husky with emotion. "I think we've just come home."

## THE BIG ANNOUNCEMENT

Why did Christ come? The best place to find the answer to any question about Christ is to look in the Bible to see if he answered it himself. And he did! Shortly after his forty days of fasting in the wilderness Jesus returned to his home area in northern Israel. We pick up the story there: "**And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, 'THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD.'** And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'" (Luke 4:16-21, caps in orig.).

Because of the nature of Old Testament quotations in the New, Jesus' version sounds a little different than what Isaiah prophesied about Messiah. The original prophecy reads: "**The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, /Because the LORD has anointed me /To bring good news to the afflicted; /He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, /To proclaim liberty to captives /And freedom to prisoners; /To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD /And the day of vengeance of our God; /To comfort all who mourn, /To grant those who mourn in Zion, /Giving them a garland instead of ashes, /The oil of gladness instead of mourning, /The mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. /So they will be called oaks of righteousness, /The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified"** (Isaiah 61:1-3).

By comparing them we can see that Jesus was summarizing an amazing list of good things God was going to do through the sending of the Messiah. He stacked a bunch of specific benefits up, and then summarized it all by saying that the "favorable year of the Lord" would come. Every forty-nine years in Israel came the year of Jubilee when everyone who had lost land would have it returned to them according to the apportionment which the Lord had made by tribe. Every seven years all Hebrew slaves were to be set free, and the fiftieth year would coincide with that. It was a grand celebration of release and restoration, with the sole purpose of glorifying the Lord as the owner of every soul and every piece of land.

When Jesus began his ministry he made a point to announce: "My coming means *this*" by reading this passage in the synagogue. That should clear it up, but there is so much power in our current cultural celebration of Christmas that even believers struggle to stay in touch with these immense purposes of Almighty God in sending his Son.

## ALL GOOD NEWS

I have read that many people today say that holidays are the most difficult time of the year for them. Their family relationships are often in bad shape. Some have lost loved ones and the celebration intensifies their sense of loss. Some are poor and feel that the materialistic version of Christmas mocks them. The hoopla promises so much! And when it fails, many people reach out for the satisfaction they desire by spending too much, drinking too much, and often engaging in inappropriate sexuality. But should it really surprise us that eggnog, cookies, and a new iPod are not enough?

By contrast, Christ came to bring definitive answers to our real needs. Even a drug-addicted philanderer like Mick Ragsdale can see the value of what Christ came to bring. So can a materialistic, fame-crazed woman like his wife, Christine. What about you? Can you see your own need?

Let's look down through the list of provisions Christ said he came to bring to the needs of mankind. First, he said that he came to bring good news to the afflicted, a word which also means "humble." This is sort of a summary statement to begin the list. You will see that in each case there is a very present earthly need mentioned, all of which Christ promises to address in some way. But beyond each immediate felt need is a deeper spiritual need which dwarfs the first.

To be afflicted is a general way of saying that we are beaten down, squashed, or abused in some way. We each may have a different reason for accounting ourselves humbled by circumstances. From God's point of view, everyone ever born is afflicted by sin in a world which is not what God intended for us. We can pretend that is not the case, or be honest with ourselves and with God.

Second, Christ said he came to bind up the brokenhearted. This is a reality common to mankind. If you are not experiencing brokenheartedness at this moment, you may have done so in the past, or you will surely do so in the future. I think that if we cannot find a human solution for this we often deny it and pretend that it is not happening. I urge you, in the spirit of the great counselor Bob Newhart, to stop that! Bring your broken heart to Jesus. No earthly Christmas party will put a dent in your secret sorrow. Even getting the best present cannot reduce it one iota. Let the Great Physician do surgery on you.

But understand that there is an honest confession to make: "Lord, I am wrecked inside." That opens the door to your human need for comfort and healing within. But, as medieval Jewish commentator Rashi pointed out, this passage is about redemption. There is a spiritual need in every heart because of sin, and until you and I become brokenhearted that we have sinned against a loving and holy God our emotional healing will have no meaning. What good does it do to feel better but be totally out of touch with God and the universe which he made? Mick and Christian Ragsdale embraced their brokenheartedness on both counts.

Thirdly, Christ made a prominent call to liberty. There are many forms of bondage, including mental, psychological, physical, and the granddaddy of them all, spiritual. Christ came to shatter bondage on many levels. He also preached recovery of sight to the blind, and during his earthly ministry he restored the sight of many. As bad as it is, physical blindness does not hold a candle to the abject and utter darkness of spiritual blindness. He also came to set free the oppressed and to comfort those who

mourn. And he summarized the whole list by using the picture of the year of Jubilee in Israel. The big impact on the human soul would be to generate gladness in every area of life.

Isn't that better than drowning our regrets and sorrows in materialism, food, entertainment, and alcohol?

Some of us feel that we are damaged beyond hope in this life. Perhaps we did it to ourselves! Maybe we are stuck in a stronghold of sin which is killing us. Christ came for you.

Maybe you hear the list Christ gave for why he came and think: "I don't need any of that. I'm fine." My prayer for you is that God will grant you the recognition of your spiritual need. Apart from Christ you are ignorant of God, morally naked, and spiritually dead. Your only hope is Jesus. Christ came for you.

Some of us are already Christians and think that this list of provisions Christ made at his coming is for those who don't yet know Christ. It's all for bad and lost people. No. Ask God to reveal the brokenness of your soul because of sin and renew your sense of need. I remember a line from an old hymn which says: "I need Thee every hour." I can tell you that it is worse than that! We need Christ and his redemptive work every instant. Christ came for you.

And if this is truly the point of Christmas, how could we ever keep such good news to ourselves? To whom have you been sent with the ministry of forgiveness, healing, and purpose in Christ? Just look around you. Christ came to minister to them through you.

One of the greatest gifts God gave to rockers Mick and Christine was their sense of personal brokenness and spiritual emptiness. It is only as each of us walks that road that we understand why Christ came. This is the meaning of Christmas.