

make Christ no more than an antidote to our thoughtless behaviours.

But if these are the common thoughts about Christ, we must now turn to the thoughts of a true Christian about Christ. But before we begin to define them, it's important to recognize that this is not mainstream stuff. If this is how you see Jesus, you are in the minority. The number of people who are clear in their thinking about Christ in every age is small.

But let this gathering of people not be like everyone else. Let us be distinct in the way that we think with clarity and precision about our Lord and Saviour.

And the first sign of a true Christian is you have high thoughts of Christ. They see him as the wondrous person he is, far above all other beings in his nature – a person who is at one and the same time perfect God, mighty to save and perfect man, able to feel what we feel.

True Christians have trustful thoughts of Christ. They daily lean the weight of their souls on him by faith, for pardon and for peace. Ryle says, "They daily cling to him as a child in a crowd clings to his mother's hand. They run to him in search of grace, comfort, help and strength."

True Christians have hopeful thoughts of Christ. They expect to receive far more from him from any other. They look forward with great anticipation to his return, to their heavenly inheritance, to their bodily resurrection, to entering Christ's eternal kingdom. They anticipate what Christ will do next with joy and gladness.

True Christians have loving thoughts of Christ. They love him because he first love us. They want nothing more than to please him, to serve him and to adore him with all their might.

And, true Christians have

experiential thoughts of Christ. Christ is not a thought experiment but he is a person to be known, loved and experienced.

And so now I must ask, What do you think of Christ? It's entirely possible that you can go numbly through this holiday season and think virtually nothing about him. You could even say, "He's the reason for the season" and leave him there, a baby in a manger. Or maybe your thoughts remain muddled and conflated – You believe something about him but you can't quite say it.

But entertain for the moment that this Christmas will be your last. Heaven forbid! But for us Christians the idea of death is not something to fear or avoid. For it is the gateway to our eternal life in Him. But what if it is? What if you only have one more Christmas to gather with family and wrap presents and sit by the Christmas tree with egg nog and friends?

What matters most? Time with loved ones, yes. Making the most of every moment, certainly. But knowing your saviour above all.

Ryle concludes, "Mark my words! If you will only take the advice I have now given you, you will never repent it. Your life in future will be happier. Your heart will be lighter. Your Christmas gatherings will be more joyful. Nothing makes Christmas meetings so happy, as to feel that we are all travelling on towards an eternal gathering in heaven. I say for the last time, if you would have a happy Christmas, have right thoughts about Christ."

The angel tells us, "He is the most high. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever, his kingdom will never end."

Thanks be to God, Amen

"Prepare Him Room: Who Is This Christ?"

December 10th, 2023 — Selby United Church — Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

By Rev. Mike Putnam

Here's a story I came across this week that illustrates the importance of getting the story straight.

A little over a hundred years ago an editor of an English newspaper opened a copy of his own paper after it was already for sale, only to find in it a most embarrassing, unintentional, typographical conflation of two stories. One about a patented pig killing and sausage making machine and the other about a gathering in honour of a local clergyman, the Rev. Dr. Mudge.

This unfortunately blended story read as follows: "Several of Rev. Dr. Mudge's friends called upon him yesterday and after a conversation the unsuspecting pig was seized by the hind legs and slid across a beam until he reached the hot water tank. There upon he came forward and said there were times when the feelings overpowered one and for that reason, he would not attempt to more than thank those around him for the manner in which such a huge animal was cut into fragments was simply astonishing. The Reverend concluded his remarks when the machine seized him and, in less time than it takes to write it the pig was cut up into fragments and worked up into a delicious sausage. The occasion will be long remembered by the Reverend's friends as one of the most delightful of their lives. The best pieces can be procured for ten pence a pound. And we're sure that those who sat so long under his ministry will rejoice that he has been treated so handsomely."

Christmas in our culture is an almost universally loved holiday. It's a season of parties, parades, gatherings, and

decorations. It's a season of gift giving and music making. It's a season loved by young and old alike.

But it's curious that it is a time of the year during which so many exert so much energy, focus and money but if you were to catch someone on the street corner and say, "Excuse me, what is this Christmas stuff all about, very few could tell you succinctly why it is that they celebrate the holiday at all.

Very likely they will attempt to blend a bunch of different ideas together and offer up an explanation that is almost as comically confused as the story of Rev. Dr. Mudge and the sausage machine. They will probably tell you about the importance of family, generosity and kindness. They might even speak of the "Spirit of Christmas" (whatever that is). They may tell you that it is for the children and when we remember the birth of baby Jesus. But most, unless really pressed, will tell you that Christmas, for them, is about the incarnation of Christ and the full depth of meaning behind it.

But since this cobbled together holiday sounds nice enough, few pause to consider how incoherent it really is. But of course, we know that "Christmas," in the words of the grinch, "is about a little bit more."

I'm always curious that each year at this time I make my bi-annual trip into the local radio station to record a 60-second message entitled "The True Meaning of Christmas." I enjoy doing this little message each year, even as I find it enormously challenging to say something in just 60-seconds.

What is the true meaning of

Christmas? How can the meaning behind the sentiments of niceness actually be helpful to the average and ordinary person caught up in the vacuousness of a mostly commercial holiday?

What would you say? If asked, and only given 60 seconds, what is Christmas all about?

Well, of course, the reason for the season is the birth of Jesus. But who cares? Why should the world hang lights and cook turkeys and give gifts and engage in all sorts of frivolity – all in celebration of the arrival of this one person in particular?

Well, nowhere perhaps, is the answer to that question clearer than it is in the birth announcement made by the angel Gabriel to a young and unexpected mother named Mary.

And as we work our way through this text let us frame our thinking in terms of three simple questions:

1. Why should all people think of Christ at Christmas?
2. What are some common thoughts about Christ?
3. What should we think of Christ?

And we begin with “Why should all people think of Christ at Christmas?” And we begin here because most will say, “Well, all this religious stuff is fine for some people. I mean, let preachers and old ladies and Sunday school teachers think about this stuff, but I have no interest in these old stories and high-minded ideas.”

I remember a time when I heard the stories of Christmas in church and thought to myself, “Who cares? What does all this have to do with me and my real life? I thought I was very important back then; I was very smart too. The world was my oyster and I had more important fish to fry. I enjoyed the nostalgia of going to church and lighting candles on Christmas Eve,

singing familiar carols, but what it all meant to me was a bit fuzzy.

But it wasn’t long before I realized that these old stories actually spoke about a reality that was true reality. They spoke of a truth that is the truth behind every truth – and was the basis of everything I believed and held dear. These fanciful stories actually addressed me and my biggest problems.

I realized that I was going to die one day. And that day was getting ever closer. And there were aspects of my self-made self-actualized life that left me wanting – left me afraid – left me unsatisfied. But then, as the old hymn says, “Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting Light, the hopes and fears of all the years, are met in Thee tonight.”

So, Gabriel proclaims words to Mary that should give us pause. “You are to conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his Father David and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

Now let us not conflate stories here. Let us keep our minds sharp and our ideas about Christ clear. If what Gabriel has announced is true then our thoughts about Christ are so very important.

Because what Gabriel is telling us this morning is that this child who is born at Christmas hasn’t come to simply give us warm thoughts and good will towards all. Because this little child in a manger, sweet and lowly, will not stay a little child forever. He will grow up to fulfill a most important role for each one of us.

He will be appointed mediator between God and humanity, and through him alone we can be reconciled, pardoned,

justified and saved. He has been chosen to give each one of us everything we require for our soul. He has been given a role as our substitute to bear our sins in his own body and shed his own lifeblood to pay the debt for our transgressions (both personal and collective).

Christ holds the crowns of this world and the next. He holds the keys of death and hell. He knows the way to the new reality God is making – a new heaven and a new earth “where there will be no more death or mourning, crying or pain.”

He will one day set up his judgment seat and summon all humankind to stand before it. To him every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that he is Lord. And it is based entirely on your relationship with him that your sentence will be given.

In short, there is no person, living or dead of such immense importance as Christ. There is no person more worthy of our thoughts than Him. But what do you think?

And so, let’s consider for a moment some of the common errors about Christ. And we can put these into four categories. These aren’t mine – they belong to J.C. Ryle. But notice how nothing has changed. 150 years ago, people found the same ways to dismiss and avoid the importance of Christ.

Ryle’s first category is what he calls the “Blasphemous thoughts.” He says, “They are not ashamed to deny his divinity. They refuse to believe the miracles recorded to him. They pretend to find fault with not a few of his sayings and doings. They even question the perfect honesty and sincerity of some of the things he did. They tell us that he ought to be ranked with great reformers and philosophers, like Socrates, Seneca and Confucius. Thoughts like these are purely ridiculous and absurd. They utterly fail to explain the enormous influence which Christ

and Christianity have had for eighteen hundred years in this world.” I guess we can make that two thousand years now!

But this first category caught my attention because it’s not new! Ryle wrote this sermon in 1863. And yet, people in every age seem to assert “new” ideas about Christ as if they are the first ones to think of these objections to what the Bible says. But the objections don’t stand up to scrutiny.

Ryle’s next category are thoughts of Christ that are “vague, dim, misty and indistinct.” He says, “That there was such a person they do not for a moment deny. That he was the founder of Christianity, and the object of Christian worship, they are quite aware. But they could not tell you what it is they believe. They could not accurately describe and define it.” And to this category of thinker Ryle says, “To be a dying sinner with an immortal soul, and to go on living without making up one’s mind about the only person who can save us, the person who will be the last judge of us, is the conduct of an irrational person.”

His next category he calls, “Mean and lowly thoughts.” He says, “They take the crown off Christ’s head, and degrade him into a kind of make-weight to one’s soul.” In other words, they believe Christ does something – his one power is the forgiveness of our sins – but they do not exalt him as Lord of their lives. They strip him of his function and office as our God every day, not just judgement day.

And finally, Ryle says, “The thoughts of some about Christ are wicked and unholy.” He suggests that some know exactly who Christ is – they know their Bibles and can recite the creeds, but it makes no difference in how they live. They go on sinning and living as if lying, cheating, drunkenness and every kind of immorality is inconsequential. To carry on in this way is to