

‘CHRISTMAS PREPOSITIONS & A CHRISTMAS PROPOSITION’

[Christmas Eve 11pm, and Christmas Day 9am, 2019]

1. The Grammar of Christmas.

Tonight’s/today’s Christmas message begins with a grammar lesson. I can already hear some of you inwardly groan. To be honest, I can actually imagine the page in a communication text-book which uses an opening line like that to illustrate what not to do to capture people’s attention. But I don’t care. I’m sticking with it. Today’s Christmas message begins with a grammar lesson. Because sometimes, maybe not that often, but sometimes grammar really matters. And I want to try and persuade you this evening/morning that the grammar of Christmas really matters.

In particular I want to talk to you tonight/today about prepositions. To be honest, I’ve spoken English since I learnt to talk and until I started studying a foreign language as an adult I really had no idea what a preposition was. But since then I’ve come to see how important they are.

So let me start with a definition (just when you thought this introduction couldn’t get any worse, now he’s giving me a definition of a preposition!). That’s right. A preposition is a word in a sentence that governs a noun and express its relationship to another word or words in that sentence. So for example, in the sentence ‘you are sitting on the church pew’- the word ‘on’ is a preposition, because it describes the relationship of you and the pew. You’re on it. To give another example, in the sentence ‘I sat through an inexplicably boring start to a Christmas message last night/this morning’ the word ‘through’ is a preposition, because it describes your relationship to the start of the Christmas message. Do you get the idea? Prepositions describe relationships. That’s why they matter.

This is why we say things like: “I’m not laughing at you, I’m laughing with you” (which is usually a vaguely apologetic sentence uttered by someone who actually was laughing at you!) ‘At’ and ‘with’ are prepositions in those sentences and there is a big difference between the two. And let me give you some other examples of sentences where a preposition makes a big difference- just to drive the grammar lesson home. There’s the difference between “I swam in Bass Strait” and “I swam across Bass Strait”- both suggest you’re a bit nuts but the former is far more believable than the latter. There’s also a big difference between “I found the cat hiding behind the fridge” and “I found the cat hiding in the fridge”. I suspect by now you’ve got the idea. Prepositions matter. And they matter especially at Christmas. Let me show you what I mean.

2. Four Christmas Prepositions.

For my Christmas message this year I want to read to you four very short passages from the Bible, each of which contains a very important preposition. And together these four prepositions tell the story of why Christmas really matters. Each of the four passages will be up on the screen so you can follow as I read and explain them. And there's an outline of where I'm headed on the back of your order of service.

i) Jesus was equal WITH God

Philippians 2:6-7

We start with Philippians 2:6-7. And these are verses about Jesus' life before he came to earth as a baby. And to Christians, this is actually a very important part of the Christmas story. These are verses about where Jesus was and who he was with before he arrived in the Bethlehem manger. Let me read you what the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians. We actually heard the whole paragraph in our reading earlier. But this is verses 6-7. [SLIDE] And it's describing Jesus.

'Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.'

The Bible actually teaches us that Jesus is, in very nature, God. It's not only true that he is the Messiah, the Son of God. It's also true to say that he is God himself. That is why the wise men travelled such a long way that first Christmas not just to honour him, or to present him with precious gifts, but to worship him. Worship is something you reserve for God. And those wise men knew very well what they were doing.

Jesus existed before he was born as a human child. He was equal with God. But, he did not consider his equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, something to be grasped tightly, something to be clung on to. Rather, he humbled himself. He came down. To earth, from heaven. He was made in human likeness. And he came as a human in order to serve humans.

This first preposition is important to Christians because it tells us what Jesus left behind. He was WITH God. He was equal WITH God. When he came to earth as a baby boy he didn't appear out of nowhere. He came down. He left behind the majesty of his throne in heaven. He surrendered his position at his father's right hand. He gave up the splendour of his heavenly kingdom. And this is important because it pushes us to ask a crucial question. Why? Why would he do that? Why did he do that? Jesus was equal WITH God.

ii) Jesus dwelt AMONG us

John 1:14

But then, Jesus dwelt AMONG us. And this is the second Christmas preposition for us to think about tonight/today. And here I want to share with you one of the opening verses of John's gospel. John actually begins his biography of Jesus' life in a very poetic way. And this is one of the key verses in his introduction. He describes Jesus as 'the Word'. [SLIDE] Listen to what he writes.

'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.'

He's actually saying some very similar things here to what we read in Philippians 2 from the apostle Paul. Jesus came from his Father. And he came to earth full of the grace of God and the truth of God. That is, even though he left behind the majesty of his heavenly throne, he did not leave behind his divinity. By becoming a man he did not give up his god-ness. Jesus the human was full of the divine character. Grace. Truth. And though for a time he surrendered his position at the Father's right hand, he did not surrender his glory. In fact, one of the things John's gospel is at pains to stress is that when people saw Jesus, and heard him speak, and saw the absolutely incredible things he did, what they encountered was the glory of God. Jesus was the life of God, the glory of God, the grace and truth of God, wrapped in skin. He became flesh. And he made his dwelling AMONG us. Among us!

Just last week a mate of mine was at a pub in Clovelly enjoying a trivia quiz with a table of friends. And early in the evening he glanced over at the adjacent table and saw in one of the teams he was competing with was a face he recognised. It was Steve. Steve Smith. The former Australian cricket captain. Arguably one of the best batsmen the world has ever seen. My mate resisted the urge to take a sneaky photo. But he did post about it on Facebook. And as far as social media news feeds go, it was definitely newsworthy. You don't usually turn up to your local for a beer, a chicken schnitzel, and some trivia and expect to run into Steve Smith.

In the same way, if you were an inn-keeper in dusty Bethlehem 2000 years ago, you don't rent out your stable on a very full night and expect to find out in the morning that the Jewish Messiah was born in it. Likewise if you were a rugged shepherd around those parts 2000 years ago you don't expect to get some angels telling you to head into town and see the Son of God in a manger. That's definitely newsworthy. If Steve Smith hanging with the common people at the pub is worthy of a Facebook post, then God the Son turning up in a barn is undoubtedly worth telling people about. He made his dwelling AMONG us.

iii) Jesus reconciles THROUGH his blood

Colossians 1:19-20

But we still haven't answered the "why" question have we? Why did he? Why would he? Well, this is where our third passage and our third preposition helps us.

Philippians 2 told us he came to serve. He humbled himself by becoming a man. And Philippians 2 goes on to say that he ultimately humbled himself by his death on the cross. And that's what Colossians 1 is talking about too. Let me read you these verses, again, from the pen of the apostle Paul. [SLIDE] And once again he's talking about Jesus.

'For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.'

Once more you notice what the Bible tells us about Jesus' divinity. All God's fullness dwelt in him. We're reminded again that though Jesus left behind his majestic throne to dwell on earth, he did not leave behind his god-ness. He came to earth with the life of God in him. As he dwelt with us, God dwelt in him.

And it pleased his Father not only to have his fullness dwell in him, but to see Jesus accomplish what he came to do. He came to reconcile. And it would ultimately be through his blood shed on the cross that reconciliation would come. By standing in the place of the guilty, Jesus the innocent bears our sin, and he embraces God's judgement, so that we would never have to. And you notice too that this reconciliation is available not only to people on earth, but to creatures in heaven as well. It's cosmic in scope!

Of course, the word reconciliation implies a broken relationship. And without Christ's humble service of us, a broken relationship with God is all we'd have. Because in big and small ways we've all ignored God, our relationship with our creator has always been in need of repair, in need of healing. So many people today just presume that everything's fine between them and God. But it's not. And what all true Christians come to recognise is that without Jesus their relationship with God would remain permanently and tragically broken. But this is why we love Jesus. It's why we love Christmas. And this is why you can't understand Christmas without understanding Easter as well. Because Jesus came to reconcile. He came to make peace between people and God.

I didn't watch the Woolworths Carols in the Domain on TV the other night, but I heard from a friend about the introduction to the John Lennon song "Happy Christmas (War Is Over)". Apparently as that was about to be sung, the MC said this: 'So hold up those candles . . . and help us spread John Lennon's enduring message of peace on earth'¹. Now I think that's a perfectly good song, but I've got news for the Woolworths Carols script writers. I'm not sure that's John Lennon's message. It goes back a lot further than the 1960's. Peace on earth is the message of Jesus. And Jesus wasn't just talking about the end of war and fighting. He was talking about the peace we all need- peace

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5v4Urekh0k>: Woolworths Carols in the Domain- 2:07:16-2:07:33

between us and God. And it was a peace he was able to accomplish, not just wish for. He came to earth that first Christmas with a mission- to reconcile people to God. And that reconciliation we all need can only come THROUGH Jesus, and THROUGH his blood.

iv) Jesus prepares a place FOR his people

John 14:2-3

And, of course, what God accomplishes THROUGH Jesus, is FOR the people he loves. And the fruit of the reconciliation he wins lasts forever. Because after his death on the cross Jesus rose again. And he returned to the majesty of his throne in heaven. He was lifted up to heaven again, just as he came down, in order to prepare a place FOR his people. This is our fourth passage and our fourth preposition. [SLIDE] These are Jesus' own words from John 14. When he said this he was talking to his disciples.

'My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.'

This completes Jesus' journey, you see. He came down to earth from heaven in order to take people with him to heaven. He came down so that we might be lifted up. He comes to be with us so he can carry us to our eternal home.

And I've come up with a diagram that I hope helps to summarise what these four Christmas prepositions teach us. [SLIDE]

Jesus was WITH God in heaven, and he was equal WITH God. The crown on the left represents the majesty of his heavenly throne. But he left it behind in order to be born in a stable, and the amazing truth of Christmas is that he came to dwell AMONG us. And that's why one line in my diagram turns into two. Because when Jesus was born, his story and our story became joined. He humbled himself by becoming a man and then he humbled himself even further in his death on a cross. And he did that in order that we might be reconciled to God THROUGH him, and THROUGH his blood. And because of his humility, his service, all who trust him can now be with him forever. He prepares a heavenly home FOR his people. This is the Christmas story. This is why the grammar of Christmas matters. Because these prepositions tell us what's important. Jesus WITH God. Jesus AMONG us. Jesus reconciling THROUGH his blood. Jesus preparing a place in heaven FOR his people.

They're my four Christmas prepositions. [SLIDE – Blank] I hope they were more interesting than you expected. But having shared with you these four Christmas prepositions, I want to finish tonight/today, with a Christmas preposition. I want to propose something to you.

3. A Christmas Proposition.

And my Christmas proposition is this. Will you do something with the Christmas story? I propose we don't just hear it again this Christmas and nod our heads politely, but that we actually respond to it. Because it's a story that's looking for a response.

So many of us are just trying to get through Christmas. Perhaps some of us are making an effort to "spread the Merry" as those Australia Post ads have urged us to do?! But God's message to us is that Christmas is not just something to be endured. And it's not just for shared merriment either. Christmas is for remembering something totally newsworthy- something momentous. And it's for responding to this momentous thing.

For some of us responding will mean doing as we've done for many Christmases before- praising God for Jesus and savouring his goodness with grateful joy. For some of us it might mean acknowledging we've been ignoring Jesus lately, or even for a long time now, and seeing this Christmas as an opportunity to turn back to him and to embrace once again his word, his people, and the life he calls you to live. For others of us responding to the Christmas story might mean acknowledging we've never really understood what all the fuss is about. And if that's the boat you find yourself in this Christmas then my proposal for you might be that you make 2020 the year you do some investigating- that you really try to find out why people worship Jesus, why they love him, why they've devoted their lives to him. And if you're interested in doing that then there's lots of ways we at St Mark's would love to help you.

But whatever it might mean for you, my proposition for you this Christmas is that you don't just let a wave of tinselly and nostalgic festiveness wash over you. My proposition is that you certainly don't let the Christmas story wash over. But that you respond to it. Because it really is a stunning story. And it's true.

A couple of thousand years ago Jesus who was WITH God, came to be AMONG us. And he came so that we could be reconciled to God THROUGH him and be with God forever in the place he has prepared FOR his people. It's true. And it's wonderful. And it's not the kind of story where you close the book at the end and just get on with your day.

'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.'