

**Text: Luke 1:67-79**

**Theme: Christmas Story Retold**

**Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Christmas Eve Holy Communion Service on 24/12/2016 at 11:15pm**

It is often said that familiarity breeds contempt. But perhaps more often than not there is a step in-between familiarity and contempt. And that is forgetfulness. Familiarity leads to forgetfulness which leads to contempt. For example, the story is told about William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper owner who died in 1951. He was very wealthy and over the years invested a fortune in collecting great works of art. One day he read about some valuable pieces which he decided he must have for his collection. So, he sent his agent off to track them down and see about acquiring them. It was several months before the agent returned and reported to Hearst. He'd found the works Hearst wanted, but it wouldn't be possible to buy them. "Why not, Hearst asked. I want them and I can afford them." The truth was, as the agent reported, that they were already sitting in Hearst's own warehouse - he'd purchased them years before but had forgotten all about them.

Now when it comes to the person of Jesus Christ, in the same vein, familiarity whilst perhaps not always leading to contempt, certainly does lead to forgetfulness. And that is not simply the problem the non- Christian has. It's a problem that afflicts Christians too. All too often we forget how truly wonderful our Lord Jesus Christ is, how remarkable it is for God to take on the image of a man.

Christmas celebration comes once a year and it is by far the busiest time of the year for most people. This isn't something new. When Jesus was born, Christmas meant a census and all of the people in Israel were travelling to their ancestor's land in order to be counted. Bethlehem was so crowded that on the first Christmas night, there was no guest room for Mary and Joseph. It was so busy there, that I have wondered if anyone besides the Shepherds even noticed the birth of Jesus just as many people today do not care about the Christ of Christmas.

In December 1903, after many attempts, the Wright brothers were successful in getting their "flying machine" off the ground. Thrilled, they telegraphed this message to their sister Katherine: "We have actually flown 120 feet. Will be home for Christmas." Katherine hurried to the editor of the local newspaper and showed him the message. He glanced at it and said, "How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas." He totally missed the big news--man had flown!

The true celebration of Christmas begins with the understanding that God took the initiative to become like us and to be with us. Divinity found a meeting point with humanity. Jesus becomes our Immanuel—God with us. He becomes the answer to our deepest feeling of loneliness and isolation especially from our maker.

Why would God in Jesus travel so far from eternity to the world He created? When God made man, there was perfect harmony between Him and His creation. They had time to converse on a regular basis. **But man created a distance and chasm through disobedience and Jesus becomes the bridge.** The God of the universe left the glory of heaven and became a single-celled embryo in the womb of Mary, was born into the poverty of a peasant home and spent His first night in a cattle shed! Why? Because He loves to be with the ones he loves.

I was asking myself that question when I spotted the squirrels outside my window. A family of black-tailed squirrels had made its home amid the roots of the tree in our garden. They watch me and I watch them store their nuts and climb the trunk. We're mutually amused.

But I've never considered becoming one of them. The squirrel world holds no appeal to me. Give up Crouch End and London, air travels and train journeys, church services and laughter for a hole in the ground and dirty nuts? Count me out.

But count Jesus in. What a world he left. Our classiest mansion would be a tree trunk to him. Earth's finest cuisine would be walnuts on heaven's table. And the idea of becoming a squirrel with claws and a furry tail? It's nothing compared to God becoming a one-celled embryo and entering the womb of Mary. But he did. The God of the universe was born into the poverty of a peasant and spent his first night in the cow's feed trough. The God of the universe left the glory of heaven and moved into our neighbourhood. Who could have imagined he would do such a thing?

There is a remarkable story told by Dr. Maxwell Maltz of a love like this:

"A man had been burned and disfigured in a fire while attempting to save his parents from a burning house, but he couldn't get to them. They perished. He mistakenly interpreted his pain as God's punishment. The man would not let anyone see him-not even his wife.

She went to Dr. Maltz, a plastic surgeon, for help. He told her not to worry. 'I can restore his face.' The wife was unenthused. Her husband had repeatedly refused any help. She knew he would do so again. Then "why her visit?" he asked.

'I want you to disfigure my face so I can be like him! If I can share his pain, maybe he'll let me back in his life.

Dr. Maltz was shocked. He denied her request but was so moved by her love that he went to speak with her husband. Knocking on the man's bedroom door, he called loudly, 'I'm a plastic surgeon, and I can restore your face.'

No response. 'Please come out.' Again, there was no answer. Still speaking through the door, Dr. Maltz told the man of his wife's proposal. 'She wants me to disfigure her face to make her face like yours in the hope that you let her back into your life. That's how much she loves you.'

There was a brief moment of silence, and then, ever so slowly, the doorknob began to turn."

**The way the woman felt for her husband is the way God feels about us. But he did more than make the offer. He took our face, our disfigurement. He became like us. On the first Christmas, God took on him human flesh and became our Immanuel.**

Jesus is not to us as Christmas is to the world, here today and gone tomorrow. He is God with us. To remain with us. To share our humanness and pain. And to lead us back to God through His ultimate sacrifice of himself. Let us not fall prey to the devices of Satan who would want the world to think of Christmas as a time of eating, drinking, spending, making money and ensuring that the name and person of Jesus is tucked far away where it would not come into contact with the "festivities". Christians should seek to make Christ the focal point of Christmas. It is after all, His Christmas!

Our society has shifted the focus right away from Jesus and right onto Santa Claus. Putting Christ into Christmas doesn't just mean going to church on Christmas Eve, but getting to know the One who is the Christ and living the way he did.

Culturally, Christmas has become a family time. But for so many people the holiday accentuates their pain. This may be because of broken or fragile relationships, bereavement, etc. Yet Immanuel, God with us, goes looking for us everywhere whatever our post code and status; inside the well heated houses and on the streets in the freezing cold, in the mansions and everywhere in between.

Our God is a Missionary God. He left the comforts of His throne and made some lowly cattle shed his birthplace. This is the first pointer that this God is willing to reside in any heart, no matter how vile if it allows Him to reside there. By His being born in that lowly stable, it became the most famous stable in the whole world. Similarly, when God comes into our heart and life, He transforms the ordinariness, the sinfulness into something glorious and holy. Won't you let your heart become a manger where the Christ-child can be born afresh?

It has been said that the greatest sacrifice that Jesus gave for us was not dying, but becoming a man. Christmas is a time to remember and celebrate the birth and life of Jesus. Christmas is not a time to count how many gifts are under the tree, but to account for why we celebrate Christmas. I hate to disappoint you, but it's not because of Santa Claus.

Have you made that decision yet? Have you invited Him into your life? Have you made room in your heart yet for Christ? Won't you let Him come in? **Remember this: He who does not have Christmas in his heart will never find it under a tree.**

If we are going to make room for Jesus we must accept Him by faith. Put yourself in Joseph's shoes. In Matthew 1 we learn that Joseph was betrothed to be married to Mary. Betrothal was similar to our engagement but, in their society, it was as binding as marriage. That explains the solemn nature of Joseph's decision to put her away. Up until this event he must have been day dreaming about the honeymoon and about building a life with Mary. Then, his plans were changed. God sent an angel to tell Joseph that his betrothed wife was pregnant. What a shocking revelation! Talk about having your faith stretched.

Common sense would tell him not to believe the "conceived by the Holy Spirit" explanation. Self-defence would have told him not to do it. After all, 'what will the rest of the family think of it'. His pride and self-respect would have cautioned against continuing the relationship with Mary. But God told him to do it. I have a feeling you can relate to Joseph. Maybe you are in the midst of decision making that would disrupt your life though you know it is God that's leading you on. God's ways may not always seem rational. God's ways may not always be easy. It does require that we accept His way by faith.

Joseph chose God's will. He recognised that the only thing worse than a venture into the unknown was the thought of denying his Master. But God does not leave Joseph dangling in mid-air. He helps Joseph work through his doubts. God works that way! When you know Jesus Christ, you will realise that He is truly the Immanuel –GOD WITH US. +

### **Hope in the world and for you.**

Is there hope in the world? Yes! Hope invaded the world 2000 years ago, at Bethlehem. And if we want that hope to invade our lives, we must do what the shepherds did so long ago. We must come to Bethlehem and bow before the newborn King. Hope is available but only to those who will humble themselves, come as they are, and bow in faith before the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you believe he is the Son of God from heaven? Do you confess that you are sinner? Do you admit you need a Savior? Do you believe that Jesus died for your sins? Are you willing to trust him as your Lord and Savior? Will you bow before him and crown him as your King?

Some people think about Jesus each year at Christmastime. Deeply touched, they resolve to know him personally. Then the moment passes and the pressures of a new year lead them away from the manger. There is great danger in coming near to Christ but never making a commitment. You can't cram for heaven the way you cram for a chemistry exam. You can't take a crash course to get into heaven. Sooner or later, you've got to make a personal commitment that Jesus Christ will be your Lord and Savior. Every time you put it off, it becomes harder the next time. In the end, perhaps one of our carols words it best: No ear may hear his

coming, but in this world of sin. Where meek souls shall receive him still, the dear Christ enters in. Amen.

Is there room in your heart for Jesus? Will you bow before him? May God give you grace to make room in your heart for him. Amen.