

Christmas Day Sermon

“Jesus is God's answer to a bad reputation” - Alan Walker

Have you ever felt misunderstood? You say something or do something and the people around you just don't get it. Can you recall how you felt? Frustrated and annoyed? Lonely, isolated?

Further, have you ever been misrepresented? When the misunderstanding of you is announced to others or when someone takes what you have said or done out of context or simply leaves out a few crucial details. Can you recall how you felt? Angry and betrayed? Determined to clear your name?

When the misrepresentation is extreme we call it defamation of character and sometimes we even speak of a character assassination and the aggrieved party often responds with a threat to sue if a retraction or apology is not forthcoming in order to restore their ruined reputation. Even cartoonists are not exempt from being sued these days when someone feels their dignity has been showered on.

Jokes aside - to be misunderstood and misrepresented is a painful thing isn't it?

Well then I want to invite you to spare a thought for God. Because throughout the ages God has been misunderstood and misrepresented - defamed with repeated character assassinations - [that have inevitably resulted in the assassinations of people].

Throughout history and even to this day God is often portrayed as one to be feared.

- A God of punishment and wrath - of vengeance and war.
- A God who searches and destroys any and every “axis of evil”.
- A God who hates our enemies even more than we do.
- A God who blesses some and curses others.
- A God who favours a select few and ignores the masses.
- A God who loves the deserving - meaning the religious - meaning the church going - meaning the ritual keeping and damning the rest to fiery flames for eternity.
- A God whose love is conditional - rewarding people in strict proportion to our behaviour.
- A God whose mercy must be earned and may be lost.
- A God who is distant and exclusive - only hanging out in so-called holy places and only speaking through the mouths of a select few (and some still say only through the mouths of men and straight men at that).
- Alongside this misunderstanding to fear God is to view God as some lucky charm who will open the door of success for us to get ahead of everyone else.
- A God who seemingly is not perturbed that we have so much while others in our midst have so little.
- A God we can prove loves us by just calling our bank manager as personal wealth has become today's blessing barometer.

This God by definition is very small and needy. Small because it has been reduced to neatly fit the size of a religion or sometimes even the minute size of a particular denomination - and needy because it is forever demanding sacrifices to appease his (always masculine!) anger before we the world will be forgiven.

Let me speak plainly - **with a God like this we don't need a devil!**

And yet so many still cling to these misunderstandings and we witness so much suffering in the world as a result. Misunderstandings and misrepresentations of God that have done more damage than good and brought more death than life.

No wonder so many people reject religion today. Isn't the mantra of our times: "I am spiritual, but not religious"? **And as Church we must humbly admit that there are many who are not here today - not because they have rejected Jesus but because they have seen too little of Jesus in the Church!**

God must weep at how we misunderstand and misrepresent the character of God.

But here is the remarkable thing. God doesn't hire a lawyer and plan to sue! Instead of suing, God sends Jesus **As Alan Walker once said: "Jesus is God's answer to a bad reputation"**. This is the point of Jesus' birth that I hope we will grasp today. Put simply: That God is Jesus-like in every way that matters.

This is the point that Matthew and Luke try and convey through their imaginative recording of Jesus' birth - with even the stars in the sky glowing in his direction.

This is the point that Paul declares more directly when stating that "Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation." [Colossians 1:15]. Or as another letter writer put it: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son, ... Jesus is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being,..." [Hebrews 1:3].

This is the point that took the early church over 350 years to write in a Creed wrestling with Jesus as both fully human and fully Divine.

Now to hopefully make this a little clearer I want you to imagine watching an Orchestra or concert pianist performing a great piece of music. You are looking at a human being full of concentration and passion stretching their skills to the limit - focused only on one thing - the clear revealing of another - namely the composer. A great artist allows the audience to be touched by the composer. [Idea from Rowan Williams]

What are you listening to? The trained ear will reply - Beethoven. We see Gary playing the organ but we have an encounter with the composer Beethoven who none of us have ever met in the flesh but who we meet in the flesh and skill of Gary.

As Rowan Williams puts it: "[Jesus] performs God's love, God's purpose without a break, without a false note, without a stumble; yet he is never other than himself, with all that makes him distinctly human taken up with this creative work. [Jesus was without sin - the scriptures tell us - meaning that "there is nothing in Jesus' performance that blocks out God the composer." [Tokens of Trust 73-74].

Jesus is God's answer to a bad reputation - because "God is Christlike - and in God there is no un-Christlikeness at all" [John V Taylor].

So on that first Christmas you can almost hear God saying:

- **"Hey, if you want to really know what I am like - get to know Jesus.**
- **If you want to know my heart - listen for what Jesus is passionate about.**
- **If you want to love me then learn to do life the way Jesus does life - do as he does and you will end up living life as I originally intended life to be lived.**
- **Live in the company of Jesus and you will become a citizen of heaven while on earth."**

I invite you today to allow Jesus: his words and deeds, his living and his dying and his rising to shape your understanding of God. If you want to know what God is like - then get to know Jesus.

Even as a baby - Jesus reveals something of God's true character.

Baby Jesus - born from the womb of a poor peasant girl revealing that none of us need believe that God will not take up residence in our lives because we are too lowly and insignificant or believe that we have not been blessed because we are poor.

Baby Jesus - born in occupied territory so that none of us should speak about any place as being God-forsaken. Making all places holy and destroying the false divide between the secular and the sacred forever.

Baby Jesus - born in a stable revealing that God is more at home among manure than incense and therefore for us to trust that God chooses repeatedly to be born amidst the mess of our lives, the places that smell - the places of our failure - that which we expect to be condemned for - only to discover the infant presence of God's mercy there reaching out to us.

Baby Jesus - vulnerable and dependent - radically revealing that God is not only almighty, **God is all-vulnerable - and in a paradoxical way God is therefore dependent on us to make God's purpose live and flourish in the world and above all to make God's presence accessible to others.** And the promise is that as we take responsibility for the baby - in other words for God's presence in the world our lives will be transformed and so will the world around us.

The best illustration of this that I know is the South African Oscar winning movie, Tsotsi? It's a heart wrenchingly sad movie, and yet a strangely hopeful movie.

It's about a guy who lived the life of a tsotsi - a gangster, who cared for no one. He was not in any way troubled by the trauma he caused others. Crime and violence was his staple diet. He was not afraid to kill - in fact it came quite easily for him. One day he hijacked a car - speeding away - abandoning the driver - only to later discover that there was a tiny little baby in the back seat of the car. And there must have been something about the baby - maybe it's vulnerability - maybe it's raw need - it's overly apparent weakness - that beckoned him to remove the baby from the car - and take it with him to the shack where he lived and to begin to care for the baby.

I think there are many parallels between the baby in the movie and the baby in the manger - if not in kind, then certainly in effect.

When Tsotsi hijacks the car and speeds off he is unaware that there's a baby in the back seat. In fact he is very surprised to find a baby there. Like God's love that this baby Jesus has come to reveal - it is present regardless of whether we are aware of it or not. **Like the baby in the movie the baby in the manger reveals that we bump into God's love when you least expect it - and of course when we least deserve it.**

That God loves most, those who deserve to be loved the least.

Please notice where Tsotsi found the baby - because it is the same place Jesus tells us we will find God's grace - at the centre of our crime. Jesus tells the truth about God - that **God does not wait for our confession before coming to us with mercy - God's mercy is present at the centre of our crime - waiting to be discovered from the outset.**

As Jesus will later be accused of eating with sinners he assures us that **God's grace is more comfortable in the back seat of a stolen car than perhaps even the front seat of a sanctuary.**

And so Jesus points to a God who borders on being unfair - because God, according to Jesus, is always giving people what they need and not what we deserve. Making some, who think of themselves as righteous, rather angry

Friends I don't know what car you have been driving - but I want you to look in the back seat for God's grace - at the centre of our crime - that area of our life that we think would give God more than enough reason to stop caring for us - look in that area - and you will find God's love - and if you listen carefully you will hear words of forgiveness. Look in the back seat of your car - it's there.

In the movie we then notice slowly, slowly that it's the baby that seems to bring the full weight of Tsotsi's crime to bear upon him.

As it is with what Jesus reveals about God. God may be all forgiving, all loving, all accepting. That is God's true character. **But God's love does not cover wrongdoing -**

it exposes it. **God's accepting love awakens us to truth - and more than that - God gives us a love for truth - a love for truth more than anything else. And when we begin to fall in love with truth - we begin to become liberated people.**

It's quite paradoxical. It's only when we know for certain that we are loved, cherished, accepted - that we will have the courage to dare to look at the truth in it's face, about our life and world. Up until that moment, we prefer to pretend - to disguise - to deny - because as T.S. Elliot said - too much truth is hard to bear. **God's love, according to Jesus, awakens us to the truth and then truth awakens us to our need for God's love - and where truth and love mix - healing happens.**

Tsotsi begins to change. He becomes kind and gentle and sensitive - qualities we thought long to be extinct within his being. The baby has drawn them to the surface. It's almost as if the baby re-introduces Tsotsi to himself again. The baby reminds Tsotsi of the good he is capable of.

Now the baby comes (please note) with only one need - the baby comes with a need to be loved. And Tsotsi begins to do just that - to love - and his live and world around him begins to change.

And that's why Jesus came - to get us to love - induced by his need to be loved.

Wherever authentic loving happens Jesus / God is joyfully present! Wherever! Because God is love and when we love we imitate our maker in what matters most and in so doing we begin to fulfil our purpose in this world.

Jesus - baby Jesus - radically reveals God as all-vulnerable - dependent and in need. If I have understood the Scriptures faithfully then I see that our task at CMM is to creatively learn to love this vulnerable God by learning to love the vulnerable peoples of this city.

God and the vulnerable people of this city are relying on us for our love.

May that which is of God from these words settle in our hearts.
Amen.