

## Too much is not enough

Sermon by Andy Wurm, Christmas 2018

There was a time when churches told people they would be punished by God and sent to hell for their sins. We don't hear that much these days fortunately, especially because it's not true. We do hear a similar message though, more from outside the church than from within it, which is that you will get hot for your sin – the sin being producing too much carbon dioxide, causing global temperatures to rise. It seems we'll be punished for our sins after all, just not by God.

Even if you don't believe human activity is contributing to global warming, no-one can deny we're polluting the earth and draining its resources, and that's not good for life on the planet. There is a link between this and Christmas, because at Christmas our level of consumption skyrockets. We've heard many times over we need to consume less. The first time you heard that might have been when sitting on Father Christmas's lap, or when composing your list of what you wanted him to deliver, and someone told you not to ask for too much.

We are told to live more simply. My friend's dad once encouraged his family to live more simply by giving the women Lux soap for Christmas and the men Solvol (which feels like sandpaper on your skin). That went down like a lead balloon. We're not brilliant at doing what's best for the greater good.

Those who wrote the biblical stories of Jesus' birth believed that it would take something outside humanity to save the world, hence the birth stories contain supernatural elements such as a virgin birth, a guiding star and angels delivering messages. Usually stories about gods involving themselves in human affairs had them forcing their way in, but to the gospel writers, God was nothing like the gods, in fact, God was so different to everything, that he was free of the factors which shape actions and events in the world. That meant God's actions are unlike anyone or anything else. This is shown by setting the story of Jesus' birth within the context of an empire, which uses power to dominate. Hence, its emperor orders a census, enabling it to further impose its power and control over people. In contrast to that, we hear of God acting in the world through the lives of Mary and Joseph: two people, who in terms of worldly significance, are nobodies. They come from Nazareth, a place nobody's heard of, and go to Bethlehem: a place nobody cares about. But Bethlehem means 'house of bread', and so the child born to nobodies, for whom the world has no place, ends up in a food trough. This is God providing food for humanity which hungers for real life. And so God's power to change the world is completely unlike the way empires work. And empires can span the globe, or be run by the dictator who lives in your head.

The gospel writer has the child wrapped in bands of cloth, symbols of culture, implying God's presence relates to time and place. In our time and place, our culture, directions to what spiritually feeds us are not given to shepherds, but if we become shepherd-like by surrendering our 'worldly' power and worth, then the One who can save us will be present. Thus, Mary is the supreme metaphor of saying yes to God's request to enter the world through her and so feed the world's spirit. The gospel writer describes it as the Holy Spirit coming upon her. In our time and place we would say the Holy Spirit came from *within* her. When the Spirit becomes the driving force in our lives, it means we come to see and act like Jesus, who told his followers they would do greater works than he did. In other words, they will express love and goodness in even more creative ways than he did. It means there are infinite ways in

which God can come into the world through our lives to inspire, create, love and heal.

It is this ability of God to inspire, create, love and heal that is referred to by the angel who announces to the shepherds a Saviour has been born. The big question is 'What is this Saviour like?' The gospel writers are answering that question by the ultra-humble nature of Jesus' coming into the world. They're saying this is how God comes into the world (which is the same thing as God sending his son into the world) then God is always like this. Yet God is often portrayed differently.

God is often portrayed as a Superfigure, who's like us, but in a super way. That makes God into one of the gods I referred to earlier, who are just projections of humanity. That can only lead to either of two conclusions: (1) God is like us in wanting to fix the world's problems, but has unlimited power to do so. But, where was that God in the Indonesian tsunami? Such a God's existence can only be denied in the face of suffering. The other conclusion is (2) like us, God judges sin to be bad and wants to punish people for it, but God has the ultimate right to do so and so will. That would result in everyone being punished, so instead, out of his great love, God sends his son to take our punishment, so we can all be let off the hook and try and be nice to each other. The big flaw here is to assume God is like us wanting to punish for sin. Actually, God has more in common with a Christmas pudding than he has with our judgmental nature and desire to punish. The son of God was not born into the world as part of a plan by God to smash evil, rather, Jesus came to show us that that is precisely what we're doing all the time. He came to show us that we are run by a desire to outdo, crush or kill, whatever or whoever stands in our way. Our default setting is rivalry with one another. When you cut someone off in traffic, that's rivalry. When you remain angry because someone cut you off in traffic, that's rivalry. When your anger turns into road rage, that's extreme rivalry. When you seek recognition in the world, that's rivalry. When you try to acquire things to feel good about yourself, you're engaged in rivalry. When you want approval from others, that's rivalry, for it's competing for a sense of worth. Rivalry is a never-ending hell, because no-one ever gets all they want. We're constantly in competition with others, afraid we might miss out on what we need, so we judge those we're threatened by to be evil, to justify killing them. Of course, physically killing them would undermine our respectability, so we mostly do it socially or emotionally. We judge gays as evil, or we judge those who judge them as evil, as evil. We judge those desperate to enter our country and escape the hell of their homeland as being queue-jumpers. We judge those whose political persuasion differs to ours as evil. We judge those who don't believe in our God as condemned to hell, or we judge those who are religious as mistaken and dangerous. Rivalry dominates our relationships. That's what Jesus came to save us from.

Jesus' was always going to die as punishment for sin – because it is God's nature to be vulnerable. Hence, he put himself in a position where human rivalry would manifest itself in a public way. Jesus was punished for his sin, which was to be in the way of those who wanted to control their neck of the woods. It shows that much of what we call sin, is really just being in others' way. That's what is behind our name-calling, our gossiping, racism, sexism, discrimination. It's why kids bully each other, it's behind domestic violence, it's what drives war. Jesus came to show us what we are, what we do. It was a divine act of hope, that when we saw what we are like, we would stop. I said God is more like a pudding than a judge. That's true, because this showing us what we're like is not condemnation, it's a gift – it's the invitation to be free of rivalry and so free to be ourselves. God has given us the greatest gift of all - the freedom to be ourselves. Isn't that our deepest, most powerful and most satisfying desire? Our problem isn't that we want too much. It's that we don't want enough.