

GAL 4.4: GOD AT WORK

(Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford: Christmas Day 2006)

A little girl went to visit Father Christmas in a local store. “*And what would you like for Christmas?*” Santa asked. The child stared at Father Christmas open-mouthed and horrified for a minute, then gasped “*But didn’t you get my e-mail!*”!

The good news of Christmas is that God has already been at work. Long before we thought of what we wanted for Christmas, God sent his Son. In the words of the Apostle Paul to the churches of Galatia: “**When the right time finally came, God sent his own Son. He came as the son of a human mother, and lived under the Jewish law.....that we might become God’s sons and daughters**

1. GOD’S TIMING WAS SPOT-ON

How good are you at time-keeping?
Are you the kind of person who is always early?
Or are you always late? Or do you tend to be just on time?

When it came to the sending of Jesus God’s timing was spot on. Jesus came at “**the right time**” (GNB). The time was right for four reasons:

1. The Roman empire had reached its peak

Rome had conquered and subdued the known, inhabited world. And in conquering and subduing this world, Rome had built its roads. Like Hitler’s autobahns, these roads were built for the easy movement of troops. But in God’s good providence they facilitated the spread of the Gospel. Jesus may have been born in a Roman backwater – Nazareth and Bethlehem were far from being household words in the Roman world. Nevertheless, thanks to the Roman communications system, this babe of Bethlehem, this Jesus of Nazareth, became a household word within a century or two.

2. Greek had become the common language of the Empire.

The Roman Empire was composed of many nations and many tongues. In order to trade, a common language was needed: thanks to the exploits of Alexander the Great, the language chosen was not Latin, but Greek. This idea of a common trade language is not unusual: people who have lived in Africa or Asia will know from first-hand experience the necessity of a common trading language. When, e.g. we lived in Congo we were surrounded by a multiplicity of trading languages. But the ‘lingua franca’ was Lingala. It was this that was used in the market. It was this that was used in the army.

When Jesus came into the world, Greek was the common language. It was this common language which facilitated the spread of the Gospel.

It was this common language, which enabled the Christian Gospel to break out from the narrow confines of Judaism and become the faith for everyone.

3. *There was a wide-spread hunger for God.*

The old gods of Greece & Rome had lost their hold on the common people.

Nobody really believed in the gods who frolicked on Mount Olympus.

People were looking for a religion that was real and satisfying.

This was the time of the growth of the ‘mystery’ religions, which talked of personal salvation. But even these popular mystery religions failed to satisfy: for they too were mythological – the gods they worshipped died and rose each year.

This was also the time when many non-Jews were attracted to the lofty ideals of Judaism.

The Ethiopian official whom Philip met on the desert road was typical of many non-Jews who went to Jerusalem in search of God.

People all over the world were hungering after God – and at the right time God sent his Son

4. *The Jewish Law had done its work*

We Christians must never forget that Jesus cannot be understood apart from the Old Testament. He is the Messiah, the one whom the Jews had long awaited.

But by the time Jesus came the Jewish religion had reached its sell-by date.

It had become a negative rather than a positive force.

It had become burdensome rather than life-enhancing.

The Jewish law had done its work in preparing for the coming of Jesus.

It was very much “the right time” when God sent his Son

2. GOD’S SENDING OF HIS SON IS AMAZING

But it was not just the timing which was spot-on, God’s sending of his Son was truly amazing. Listen again: “**When the right time finally came, God sent his Son**”.

This statement should be followed by four exclamation marks!!!!

Cardinal John Henry Newman was right when he said: “*The incarnation is the most stupendous event that can ever take place on earth*”.

This morning I want to point you to four amazing aspects of God’s sending of Jesus

1. *Jesus’ entry into our world is amazing*

God, the creator & sustainer of this universe in all its vastness, sent his Son into our world.

What an amazing action.

Why, our world is little more than a speck in the cosmic galaxy.

What is more, in coming to our world, he actually became one with us.

It’s mind-boggling. No wonder Charles Wesley wrote in one of his hymns:

“*Our God contracted to a span/Incomprehensibly made man*”

2. *Jesus' becoming one with us is amazing*

In the words of Paul here, “**he came as the son of a Jewish mother**”

Literally, he was “**born of a woman**” (NRSV). Some have thought Paul was alluding to the virgin birth, but Paul was simply using a common Jewish idiom to say that Jesus was truly human. However, the fact that there is no reference to the Virgin Birth here does not make Paul's statement any less staggering.

For the wonder of the birth of Jesus is not ‘how’ he came, but ‘that’ he came.

Jesus, the Son of God, who had from all eternity been sharing in the life of God, “**came as the son of a Jewish mother**”, and in so doing, he shared our human experience.

Some 3 or 4 years ago I was one of the invited guests to witness Prince Edward opening a new university building. But although the prince visited our town that day, in no way did he identify with the ordinary people of Chelmsford. After all, this was a royal visit.

He shook a few hands, but he did not mingle with the crowd.

His time was spent with the important people – like the Lord Lieutenant, the Vice Chancellor, the MP.

His visit to Chelmsford bore no relationship to the time when Jesus visited our earth.

Indeed, ‘visit’ is the wrong word to describe the coming of Jesus amongst us.

He became a man of flesh and blood, a man like us.

In the words of one commentator: “*He was vulnerable to all the conditions of human life which constantly threaten and unsettle – fear, loneliness, suffering, temptation, doubt and ultimately godforsakenness*” (Cousair). This is truly amazing.

3. *Jesus' perfect life is amazing*

God's Son “**lived under the law**” [lit. “born under the law”]

I.e. Jesus submitted to all the requirements of the Jewish law.

What is more, Jesus went on to succeed where all others failed – for Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience to the law of God.

When Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount spoke of a “**righteousness**” exceeding that of the scribes and the Pharisees (Matt 5.20), he knew what he was talking about.

In a way which was true of no other, Jesus “**fulfilled**” the law and the prophets (5.17).

Unlike any other great man, Jesus had no feet of clay

He was perfection incarnate. Or to use the jargon, he was “without sin”.

His life was truly amazing.

4. *Jesus' purpose for us all is amazing*

And what was all this in aid of? “**He came... so that we might become God's sons and daughters**”. Yes, Christmas is all about the family – about God's family

Jesus came – in order that we might become part of God's family.

There is no better Christmas present we could receive.

Yes, long before we drew up our Christmas lists and sent our e-mails to Father Christmas, God had thought up the best Christmas gift ever.

He sent his Son so that we might become brothers & sisters to one another, and even more amazingly, be able to call him ‘Abba, Father’. That truly takes the biscuit.