

HOW GOD SEES CHRISTMAS

Pastor James Winderlich

By the time they arrived on our doorstep the rain had stopped. This was south eastern Queensland where the rain can bucket down.

We didn't know who they were. They were strangers, passing through looking for a little help to get them on their way.

Packed into their car was a Mum and Dad, two daughters, a budgie in a cage, all of their earthly possessions, and a hitch hiker. We'll get to him later. The Dad had just been released from prison in New South Wales. In there for what? I don't know, but the Mum's family didn't want to have anything to do with him. They weren't prepared to make space for him, and so Mum and the girls had to make a choice. It was either their home and extended family, or their Dad. They chose Dad, and into the car they piled. The car had been a bit dodgy and so prior to leaving they installed a reconditioned engine. It should have gotten them up the Bruce Highway into far north Queensland. That was their plan. But the engine failed. They had been ripped off, taken advantage of and the engine broke down just as they hit the Gold Coast. This luckless family were dealt yet one more blow, but they weren't prepared to toss it in. So, scraping together their remnant financial resources they had their engine repaired once again.

As they set off from the Gold Coast the skies opened up with a sub-tropical deluge. It was barely safe to drive but, with nowhere else to be, they pushed on in the rain. Still on the Gold Coast they spotted him. An older man standing alone in the rain. He was hitchhiking, hopelessly searching for dry refuge as he also headed north. Any one of the hundreds of cars that sped past could have stopped and helped. They all had room enough, and for many of them life had been good. It wouldn't have hurt any of them to give a little something back into the life of another. The life of someone who hadn't done so well. But it was as though they hadn't seen him. Maybe the rain was too heavy.

But this family saw him. This family on the move who, time after time, had been dealt cruel blows - saw him. And seeing, they stopped. This family whose entire life was deposited inside their car saw him and made space.

Now I could be easily convinced that this family had every reason to leave the man on the side of the road. After all, time after time they hadn't been shown even the smallest mercy. Not even receiving the most basic kindness. Yet they were still prepared to extend kindness and mercy to the stranger. Generosity was repeatedly snatched away from them, yet they gave, and gave. They could have justifiably feared the stranger, particularly with two young girls sharing the back seat with him, but they were still prepared to take the risk so that he could be dry and also reach his destination. All because they saw him. A wet, lonely old man. A stranger who, ironically, was clearly unseen by so many others. This family saw him.

That's all that he was really asking for - to be seen.

At around this time of year a lot gets said about the true meaning of Christmas. We hear many insights that are intended to challenge its coarse commercialisation. No-one would deny that much of what is said is helpful:

- Christmas is about being together;
- Christmas is about caring and giving of ourselves;
- Christmas is about happiness.

Only a Grinch would challenge those sentiments. But I wonder how God sees Christmas. After all, it was God's idea in the first place. What does God do around Christmas?

When Jesus' mother, Mary, betrothed but not yet married, found out that she was pregnant, she sang a song. It could have been a song of fear and dread. Worrying about what people would think. Worrying about what it meant to be a mother. But in her song she praised God for her pregnancy. Along with all of the feelings that might go with being a mother for the first time, she turned her attention to God in praise. She sang:

*My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour;*

But she didn't leave it there. She went on to sing:

*for God has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me –
holy is his name.*

Mary's song continued on, describing how Mary saw God positively at work in every part of her life and the life of her community. I want to focus on four of Mary's words:

God has been mindful

We live in an age of mindfulness. It can be a healthy meditative discipline that promotes positive wellbeing. Mindfulness allows us to draw ourselves back to the moment, and our place in it. When practised effectively it provides moments of deep, deep self-awareness. We get to shut everything else out and see only ourselves. But here in this song God is aware of Mary. God's focus is not inward but outward. God is not mindful of God, but of Mary. God sees Mary in her own fullness.

This takes me back to the family in the car whom I introduced to you earlier. They saw, in outstanding ways, the man in the rain in his fullness. They didn't see him through the lens of their own fears and even bitterness. Instead, they saw him, standing there in the rain asking for nothing more than to be seen. Just like God, their outgoing mindfulness was remarkable.

We use Christmas as an opportunity to communicate all of our own values. We like to call them the 'Real Meaning of Christmas'. But that's as far as it goes, and Christmas becomes just another form of our inwardly focussed mindfulness. But when we start to tell God's story through Christmas things change. Christmas then becomes a time of seeing. A time of God's seeing. God seeing me. God seeing you. God sees us standing there, possibly in bucketing rain, unnoticed by those who frantically move around about us mindful only of who they are, where they want to be, and what might frighten them about us. Things that communicate nothing of who we really are. Yet God sees us, and in seeing God moves to us. Just like our family who stopped in the rain.

What has Christmas offered you this year? Many good things I hope. But where in all of that were you confident that you were seen? Confident that someone was mindful, fully aware of you. That someone was seeing you. That's partly what Jesus' birth gives you. The confidence that you are seen by God, really seen. And in being seen, you receive the added confidence that God stops just for you. It's all summed up in one of the names that was given to Jesus: Immanuel. It means: "God is with us." It means that God is with you. Just like a courageous family who saw and stopped to receive a wet, lonely old man on a rainy Gold Coast highway. A man who remained unseen by so many others. God sees you.

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