

PARTNERSHIP

Christmas

A Message of Hope and Joy



Cultivating Missional Pastors,
Equipping Lay Ministers to
Strategically Engage Asia's Harvest

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Dear Friends of BTG

Advent refers to the period immediately preceding Christmas Day: a day which, while celebrated with joy by many, is also often the subject of various distortions and misconceptions. Some people consider Christmas to be a paganistic festival, confusing traditions with beliefs. The commercialisation of Christmas has made Santa Claus its star, with consumerism overshadowing the celebration of Christ's birth. The mass media often portrays an idyllic version of Christmas characterised by flawless decorations and an abundance of gifts. With the annual extensive light-up along Orchard Road currently being sponsored by Hitachi and with 'Hitachi' named on numerous banners, one could be forgiven for thinking that Christmas is about celebrating the birth of Hitachi! Gift-giving has become the norm, but often the fact that this custom is rooted in compassion and celebration of the birth of Jesus has been lost. Even the Nativity story has been enacted wrongly in many churches. Portraying the three wise men at the manger is inaccurate, as in fact they visited Jesus some time later.

The truth is that Christmas holds a profound significance for the Christian faith, marking the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. It is more than just a festive time filled with joy and family gatherings. It is a moment of deep spiritual reflection and gratitude. The significance of Christmas is woven throughout Scripture, emphasising the themes of eternal hope, gracious redemption and divine love.

The central event of Christmas is the Incarnation, when God became flesh in the form of Jesus Christ. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) The significance of this event cannot be overstated as it represents God’s desire to be close to humanity, to understand our struggles, and ultimately to redeem us through His Son on the cross at Calvary.

The birth of Jesus fulfils numerous Old Testament prophecies, demonstrating God’s sovereign plan throughout history. One prominent prophecy is declared in Isaiah 9:6, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” The fulfillment of such prophecies at Christmas assures us of God’s faithfulness and reminds us of the hope that His promises bring. Christmas offers a beacon of hope, particularly in times of despair. The announcement of Jesus’ birth by the angels to the shepherds is a powerful testament to this hope: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” (Luke 2:10)

Christmas also epitomises God’s ultimate gift of love to humanity. John 3:16 reminds us, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” This explains why the act of giving is central to the Christmas narrative. Just as God gave His Son, so we are called to reflect this love through our relationships and acts of kindness towards others.

Advent is the focus of this issue of BTS Partnership. I am grateful that seven writers have agreed to share their personal perspectives of Christmas, with each focusing on a particular aspect and reminding us that Christmas encapsulates the core of our Christian faith. As we celebrate Christmas, let us not only remember the historical event of Christ's birth, but also reflect upon its ongoing implications upon our lives and the people around us. The significance of Christmas is profound and enduring, so please feel free to use these articles as conversation pieces to share with your friends and spread the message of truth, hope and joy.

I wish you a blessed Christmas!

Peter Tang
Interim Managing Director

The Real Meaning of Christmas



Deacon Daniel Soh

Baptist Theological Seminary
Chairman of the Board of Management

Soon it will be Christmas, a time of universal celebration. For Christians, Christmas has great significance because the birth of Jesus is a message of great joy. But if you ask people of different ages and backgrounds what Christmas means to them, you will get very different answers.

For most children, Christmas is about Christmas presents. If you ask them why we give presents at Christmas, nine times out of ten they do not know the reason. Some will simply say, "I don't know why, but it's nice to receive presents."

When you ask your colleagues what Christmas means to them, many will mention going to a restaurant for Christmas dinner, going to Orchard Road to see the lights, or going on an overseas holiday with their families. That is why many companies' productivity drops to its lowest level of the year in the Christmas period.

Those living in Palestine, Ukraine, and other war zones all over the world hope Christmas will herald a truce. A few days of ceasefire on both sides would provide a welcome respite for everyone to take stock, before hostilities resume after Christmas and New Year's Day.

For those Christians who have not been to church for a long time, Christmas may be the one day of the year that they come back to church to hear the truth.

Folks, what is the real meaning of Christmas? Let's go back to the night of the first Christmas. The angel appeared to the shepherds and told them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

The fact that the shepherds and the wise men came to worship Jesus on the night of His coming to earth is extremely significant, as the status of the shepherds was completely different from that of the wise men. The shepherds' status in society was lowly, while the wise men were highly respected figures. This tells us that everyone is equal before God: God accepted the gifts that the wise men brought, just as He accepted the humble worship of the shepherds. Society may look down on you, but in God's eyes, you are a person whom He loves enough to redeem.

We are all sinners, whether you are a taxi driver or a CEO of a big company; whether you are a youth, a young adult or an adult; whether you have a primary school diploma or a doctorate degree. The wages of sin is death, and sin separates us from God forever. That is why Jesus had to come to earth to be crucified. He shed His blood to cleanse us once and for all of our past, present and future sins.

God's Christmas gift to us is salvation. But you cannot receive this gift unless you open it yourself. Open this gift and let Jesus into your life.

If you are searching for the meaning of life, you should know that doing good works alone will not allow you to find it. Neither will attending religious services, or your success, your career, your money, your position in society, or anything else. The only way to find the meaning of life is through a relationship with Jesus. How do you build a relationship with Jesus? Jesus said, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock....."

On this Christmas Day of universal joy, I invite you to open this gift and receive Jesus as your personal Saviour.

Incarnation: Flesh Unlawed



Dr Kris Chong

Baptist Theological Seminary, Faculty

It was the year 2015. At long last, my friends and I had reached America's Yellowstone National Park in a minivan. We were on our way to visit the crystalline lakes, thundering waterfalls, breathtaking canyons and stunning geysers—places which I had placed on my must-see list during months of planning. Or so I thought.

On our way to a scenic spot, I heard someone shouting: "Look! A bear! A grizzly bear!" Hastily, I tried to unbuckle my seatbelt so that I could jump out of the van to catch a glimpse of the giant predator. As I darted away, my decrescendo of joyful exhilaration morphed into what my friends heard as: "I want to see God..." What I actually said was: "I want to see **God's creation.**"

The well-known American writer Flannery O'Connor once wrote in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (1969) that, "Christ didn't redeem us by a direct intellectual act, but became incarnate in human form, and he speaks to us now through the mediation of a visible Church... [God] is incarnated in human life." O'Connor opines that human knowledge finds its origins in the human senses.

I suppose my burning desire to see a real-life grizzly bear embodies Flannery O'Connor's principle of the human deriving knowledge from what is concrete and sensory. Catching a fleeting glimpse of the back of that light brown bear made me blurt out a Job-like cry: "Now my eyes have seen you!" In that split second, time magically froze. I felt like Thomas whose emotions burst out in trepidation, joy and ecstasy when the risen Christ stood before him and bade him touch His nail-pierced hands.

This is not to say that human logic or intellect is devalued or subjugated to human sensory perception. Rather, we often ignore the fact that notions such as faith, hope and charity; truth, goodness and beauty do not come in the form of concrete objects. Hence, God became human, an abstraction taking concrete form—so that we can see, know and follow.

Have you seen God lately? Asked differently—have you seen God’s heartbeat in His works? He is the Creator of heaven and earth and all that is in them, so encountering God is not just a possibility but a reality with Christ Incarnate. The Word became flesh, or in the Christian tradition, Divine Mystery took the form of a baby whom Joseph and Mary could hold in their arms. The Nicene Creed explains: that Jesus “came down from heaven” for us and for our salvation.

Christ dwells in our midst out of love and compassion. The Incarnation brings to humanity a Savior who is the Light that shines upon the good, the bad and the messy alike. Above all, this Light also invites us into God’s loving presence as we repent of our sins.

The world might not understand or welcome such an expression of salvific love. But we know this for sure that God’s truth remains unchanged eternally; it does not change according to our intellectual comprehension or emotional perception. God does not cease to exist nor stop loving humanity. In fact, God’s love is steadfast (Psalms 36:5; 40:11; 136:1). This faithfulness is echoed by Jesus who declared that He loves His disciples until the end (John 13:1b).

The Incarnation was a once-only historical event suffused with profound theological significance. It changed human history. It affirms the dignity of the human person and opens the path for humanity to participate in the divine life, which otherwise, we can have no access to God our Creator.

A Magical Christmas



Rev Peter Lin

Ex-President of BTS

We expect Christmas celebrations to be joyful and peaceful. But can they be magical?

As a child, I constantly looked forward to celebrating Christmas. The reason – the glittering gifts under the Christmas tree. As a young adult, I also looked forward to celebrating Christmas. The reason – I loved wrapping up my carefully chosen gifts for my family. And now as an older man, I still look forward to celebrating Christmas. This is the one day in the year when I am guaranteed the precious gift of my loved ones around me. It seems that what makes Christmas celebrations special are the gifts. Yet in this wonderful giving and receiving, we sometimes miss the magic of the celebration.

Richard Selzer, a surgeon, describes a tense post-surgical visit to a young couple to deliver unfavourable tidings. These are his words.

“I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of the mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on... to remove the tumour in her cheek, I had to cut that little nerve.

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed... Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth that I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily?

The young woman speaks. ‘Will my mouth always be like this?’ she asks. ‘Yes,’ I say, ‘it will. It is because the nerve was cut.’ She nods, and is silent. But the young man smiles. ‘I like it,’ he says. ‘It is kind of cute.’

Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I, so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.”¹

Isn’t that what the Son of God did on the first Christmas Day? From heaven, He looked down at His earthly children’s twisted, painful faces that the Father had created in His image. He left His heavenly comforts; bent down in love; and took on our earthly, twisted, crooked estate. In that first Christmas, He showed the depth of God’s love despite who we are and what we are like.

Dallas Willard used the young man’s crooked kiss to describe the divine power of agape. Dallas Willard said, “Agape is a substance, with a power that can and does touch and arrange the heart and soul at a level, and in a manner, that will endure for all eternity.”²

As we witness this power and the resulting beautiful changes in our lives, we can only stand in awe. That is the reason why we celebrate Christmas. We have seen the agape power of God in real time. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Remember the real reason for Christmas. Let the earthly gifts that we receive bring us back to the incredible agape shown at the first Christmas. As Dr Selzer illustrated – a young man twisted his own lips to plant a perfect kiss on the permanently crooked lips of his beloved. Christ went way beyond that, and that is the magical reason for us to celebrate Christmas.

(1) Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the art of surgery* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 45-46

(2) Dallas Willard, *Preparing for Heaven* (HarperOne, 2015), 194-294

The Worth of our Gift



Rev Dr Gary Choong
Academic Dean of BTS

How do we express our thanks to someone who means a lot to us? Much like the “Star Awards”, there is always a way that goes beyond mere words of gratitude and points to the reality beyond the gift given or received.

It seems appropriate as we close the year to reflect upon the greatest gift we have received – the coming of Christ (Isaiah 9:6; Matt 1:20-23; Luke 2:8-12), and to think about how we might respond to that gift. I would also like to encourage those who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ to consider whether you are ready to embrace the love and forgiveness of God through Christ as your Saviour and Lord.

Let us consider something that a woman by the name of Mary gave to the Lord, which led our Lord to make a stunning comment in Mark 14:9: “And truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.” What was so remarkable about her act that Jesus would make this statement? This story took place in Bethany during Jesus’ last days on earth before his betrayal by Judas, one of the twelve disciples who had been with Him over the previous three years.

An act of GRATITUDE for His work of Grace

Mary’s alabaster jar of pure nard was poured over Jesus Christ as an act of preparation for His burial, anticipating the crucifixion of Christ on the cross (Mark 14:3). Mary knew Jesus as her Saviour and Lord (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:28-44); as the Master who said that she had chosen the better option of sitting and listening to Him, compared to her sister, Martha; and as a friend who had raised her brother Lazarus from the grave (John 11:25 – I am the resurrection and the life!).

Then came the *Sting of Criticism* – Judas' complaint about the opportunity cost (a year's wages) of the broken vase of pure nard poured over Christ when compared to spending the same amount on feeding the poor was accurate (Mark 14:4-5), but the true motive behind his comment is picked up in a parallel account in John 12:6 – greed, not concern for the poor! Judas would later value Jesus' life to be worth a mere handful of silver coins (the price of his betrayal), while Mary was willing to spend the equivalent of one year's wages to honour Jesus and commemorate His coming death.

The Affirmation of Christ for Mary's Act of Gratitude

Mary's deed was beautiful because it stemmed from her love for her Saviour and Lord. The value of her gift came from her heart (14:6-9). The true value of any gift given to Jesus Christ is all about motives (heart), not the act (image, praise of man, outward appearance, etc.). We can see this from the story of the widow's two copper coins (Luke 21:1-4) when the widow was commended even though she gave a tiny amount, because it was all she had. The point is not the amount (act), it is how fully she gave (heart).

To those who know Jesus Christ as Saviour: is this Christmas any different from past Christmases?

Does Mary's love speak to you about your own love for Christ?

Is there an abandonment to cost (financially, personally, socially) in your love for Christ?

Would you be willing to give up a year's wages to do something meaningful for Christ?

Can you relinquish your desire for others' approval out of love for Christ (demonstrate marketplace difference and be salt and light in a world of darkness and pain)?

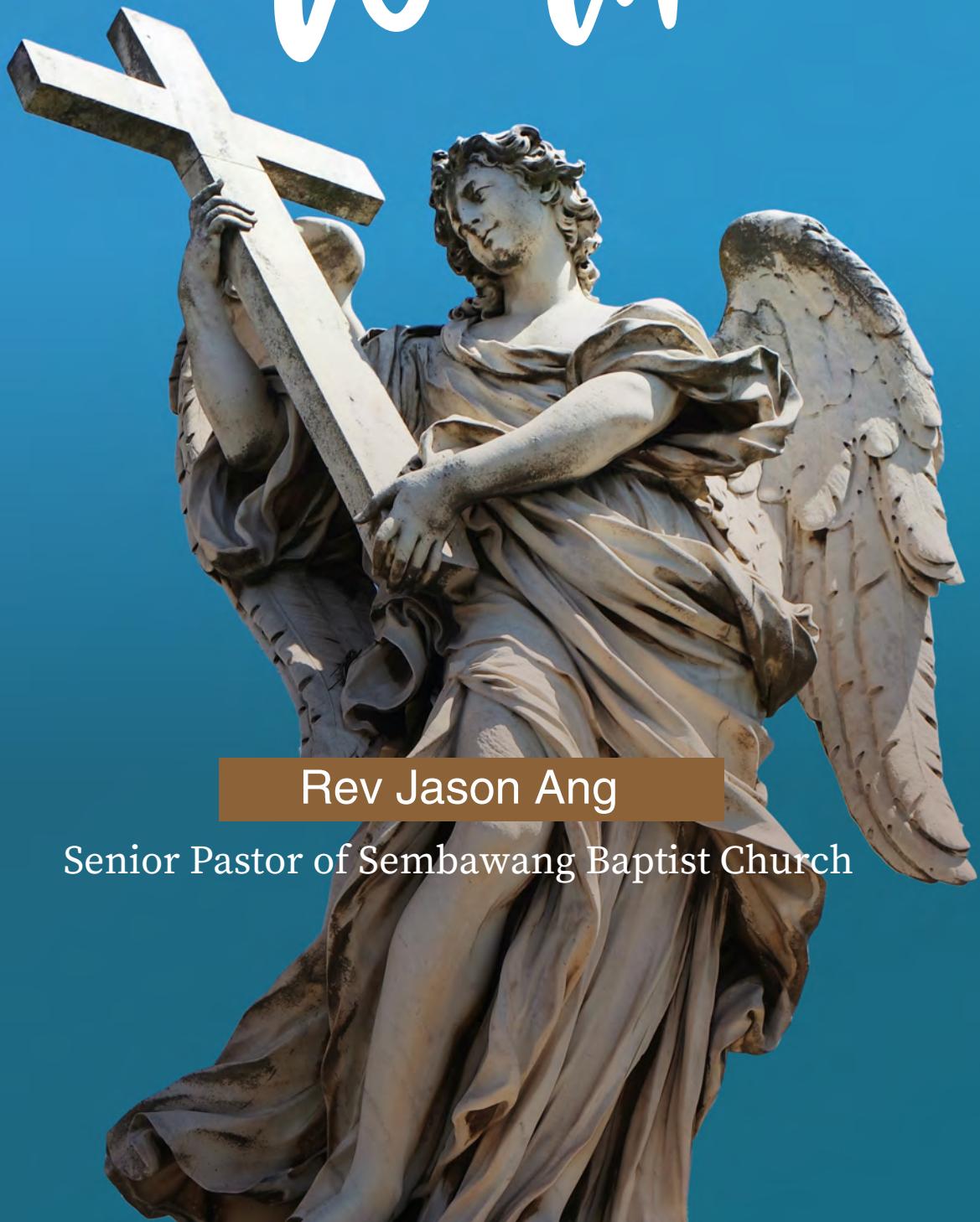
How does God weigh the value of our gift to Him this Christmas? He weighs the value of our gift based on our MOTIVE, regardless of what others might think.

In this story, Mary shows her love and devotion to Someone whom she addressed as “Lord” and “Master”, showing that she had a personal relationship with God through His precious Son Jesus Christ.

When Christ came to earth that first Christmas, His mission was to offer you eternal life (salvation) if you believe that He is the Son of the Living God (John 3:16). With salvation comes full forgiveness that is free (grace), final (no more penalty for sin) and forever (eternal life) (Phil 2:6-11; Romans 5:8; Matt 1:21-23). If you are looking for forgiveness of your past because you are lost in a world of fears, failures and futility, or if you are looking for a new beginning in 2025, put your trust in Jesus Christ as the One who can turn your life around and give you a new sense of identity and purpose.

Recently, I came across a billboard that said: “*Making a difference: IF it is not from the HEART, it is not worth doing.*” What would you give to the Lord Jesus Christ this Christmas, as a demonstration of your heart-gratitude to Him who has given you eternal life?

Joy To the World



Rev Jason Ang

Senior Pastor of Sembawang Baptist Church

And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” (Luke 2:10)

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14)

“Joy to the World” is a familiar Christmas carol that opens with the proclamation, “Joy to the world; the Lord is come!” Christmas is a season filled with joy, a time when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. This joy is more than just the joy of holiday time, decorations, gift exchanging, or Christmas meals. Christmas brings a deep and lasting joy that comes from the true meaning of Christmas: God came to be with us.

The News of Great Joy

When the angels appeared to the shepherds on the first Christmas night, they brought a message of “good news that will cause great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10). The birth of Jesus fulfilled God's promise to redeem mankind. This joy is for everyone who believes in Him, regardless of cultural or social standing. The shepherds, considered lowly in their time, were the first to hear the news of the Saviour's birth, symbolising that the message of joy is meant for all people. The joy of Christmas is rooted in the gift of salvation through Jesus, whose birth marks the beginning of God's plan to rescue mankind from sin and offer eternal life.

The Source of Great Joy

While exchanging gifts and enjoying Christmas meals can bring moments of happiness, the true and lasting joy of Christmas comes from understanding who Jesus is and what He has done. The angels' song in Luke 2:14 proclaims peace to those on whom God's favour rests, signifying the restoration of a right relationship with God through Christ. This reconciliation brings deep and enduring joy.

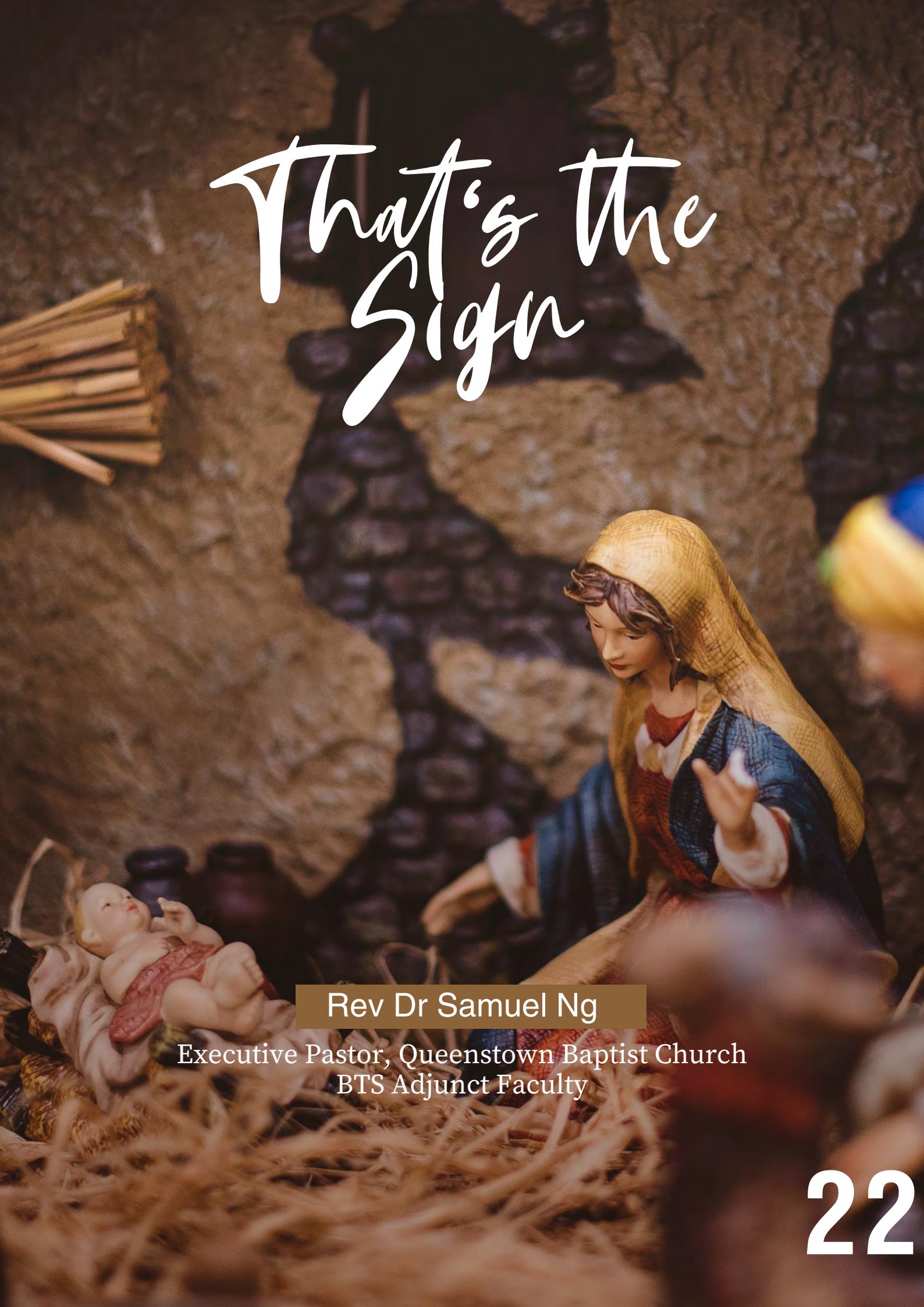
During one Christmas season, my family visited Jewel Changi Airport to admire the decorations, which included a popular display around the theme of being ‘naughty’ or ‘nice’. The display allowed members of the public to stand on a testing platform and see from the indicator whether they were considered to be naughty or nice. I didn’t look into how the judgment was arrived at, but this fun decoration reminded me that while the world focuses on whether we’ve been good or bad, Jesus came to offer salvation to us all, regardless of what we have done. This realisation filled my heart with joy and peace.

The Experience of Great Joy

The carol “Joy to the World” contains a call to “let every heart prepare Him room”. This highlights the need to make space for Christ in our hearts to experience the fullness of His joy. Amid the busyness of the holiday season, it is easy to be distracted by festivities, but true joy comes when we pause to welcome Christ into our lives. Just as there was no room for Jesus in the inn, we must be careful not to miss the opportunity to make room for Him in our hearts.

By preparing room for Christ, we invite Him to dwell within us, transforming our lives with His peace and presence. This Christmas, as we reflect on the angels’ announcement and sing “Joy to the World”, let us embrace the true joy that comes from welcoming the Saviour into our hearts. As we sing, “Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Let earth receive her King; let every heart prepare Him room!” we join the angels in proclaiming glory to God and celebrating the lasting joy that fills our lives as we make room for the King of Kings.

That's the Sign

A photograph of a nativity scene. In the foreground, the baby Jesus lies in a manger. In the background, the Virgin Mary is kneeling, holding the baby and looking down at him. The scene is set against a backdrop of a stone wall and some dried grass. The text 'That's the Sign' is overlaid in a large, white, cursive font at the top of the image.

Rev Dr Samuel Ng

Executive Pastor, Queenstown Baptist Church
BTS Adjunct Faculty

“Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. This will be a sign to you.” (Luke 2:11-12)

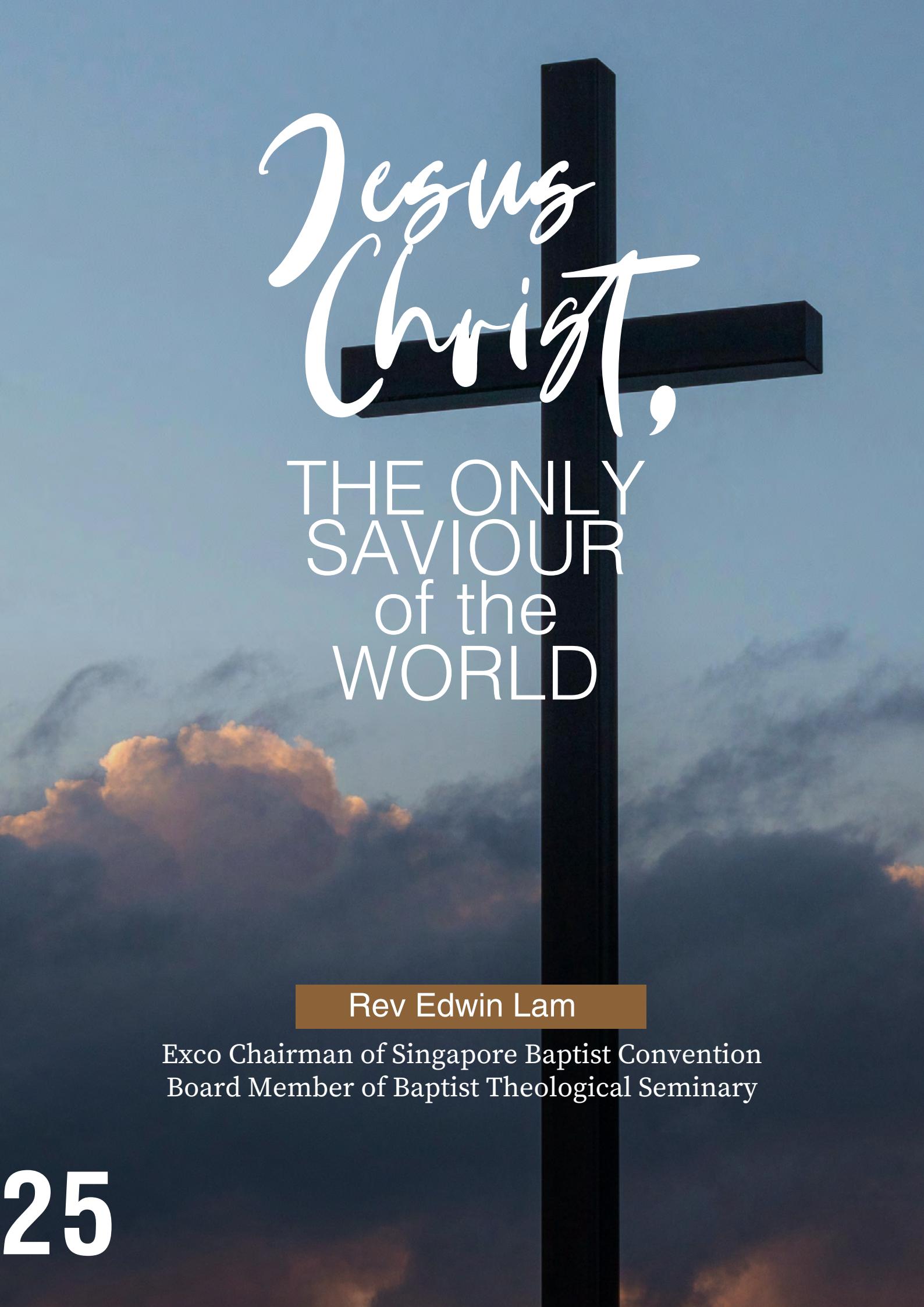
Luke recorded the scene of Jesus’ birth: “a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” The scene emphasises that the noble Saviour, the Messiah, arrived in the world with a ‘humble sign’, which was underwhelming and far from the expectations of both the Jews of the time and people today.

The word ‘baby’ conveys a picture of our noble Saviour having no supernatural appearance and being nothing more than a helpless infant born to an ordinary couple. ‘Wrapped in cloths’ implies that our Saviour lacked even basic clothing and was perhaps even poorer than the impoverished people of His time. ‘Manger’ signifies that the Saviour was not born in a glorious palace but in a cold, dark, dirty, foul-smelling place. The word ‘baby’ symbolises weakness, the ‘cloth’ represents poverty, and the ‘manger’ is a mark of shame. All of these fuel an image of Jesus as weak and poor, without authority or status.

However, the Lord Jesus was God in nature and had a glorious image. Yet, He did not count equality with God as something to be grasped. With His glory veiled, He humbled Himself and took the form of a servant (Philippians 2:6-7). His outward appearance changed, but His godly nature remained. This is akin to how ancient Chinese emperors would disguise themselves as commoners during their travels: although they shed their royal robes and donned civilian attire, their identity remained unchanged. Similarly, Jesus forsook His heavenly existence and willingly ‘became flesh’, relinquishing His rightful privileges for humanity’s sake without diminishing His divinity. This is the ‘sign’ of humility.

This ‘sign’ was meant to show the world that the Gospel had come for everyone, including for those who were the poorest and the most humble, those lacking in spirit, and busy people like the shepherds. Whenever we see this ‘sign’ we should rejoice, because the sign of weakness, shame and helplessness encases the birth of the glorious One and the salvation of the Redeemer.

May the Holy Spirit open our eyes to recognise the sign of “the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger”, and welcome this noble yet humble Christ into our lives. May we also imitate Christ's humility and live out the sign of a humble life on earth. While there is still time, let us diligently share this important sign, so that our family and friends may also discover the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger, and ask Christ to be their Saviour too.



Jesus
Christ,

THE ONLY
SAVIOUR
of the
WORLD

Rev Edwin Lam

Exco Chairman of Singapore Baptist Convention
Board Member of Baptist Theological Seminary

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

Have you ever wondered why Christians celebrate Christmas Day? It is because on that first Christmas, the immortal God took on mortal humanity to save a world that was living in sin and darkness. Romans 3 tells us that “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (Romans 3:10-12) The Bible asserts that all are sinners, from every newborn child to the century-old man/woman: all have fallen short of the glory of God! All of us sin, and to sin is to miss the mark, much like shooting an arrow that does not hit the bull’s-eye.

Once, there was a little boy who hit the bull’s-eye every time he launched an arrow. His proud father was sure that one day he would win the Olympic gold for archery, yet he was curious as to how his son was able to hit the mark every time. The cheeky lad explained that after shooting his arrows, he would draw circles around them to mark a bull’s-eye! When we miss the bull’s-eye, the solution is simple: just redraw the target! Sin is similar to this – when man defines the standard and measure of all things, our sinful nature is revealed. Yet the Bible tells us that no one is good and righteous, or can save himself by being religious, doing good deeds or giving away everything he possesses. We can only be saved by believing in Jesus Christ.

I still remember that when I accepted Christ, my Science teacher, Mr Soh, was most disappointed. He asserted his belief in evolution, saying that man came from apes and his relatives were all in the zoo. Jokingly, I retorted that my relatives were all at home, unlike his. Yet the Bible states clearly that man was created by God in His image, and thus He is the only one who can save us. Jesus Christ didn't just claim to be the Saviour of the world. By His words, His works and through His death, burial and resurrection, He proved beyond doubt that He is God who became man to save the world. Jesus Christ is not one of the saviours of the world, nor is he merely the best out of many saviours of the world. Jesus Christ is the only Saviour of the world, and that Jesus loves you is the greatest truth and reality in the universe! For God so loved the world that He gave us His one and only Son to die on the cross for our sins, that those who believe in Jesus should not perish but have eternal life.

The world needs a Saviour, not a great politician, an articulate philosopher, or a wealth-churning economist, but a loving Saviour, and there is only one criteria needed to qualify for salvation – faith alone! We cannot receive Christ by religiosity, good deeds, knowledge, wealth or great sacrifices, but only by faith. Christianity is not a religion. It is God restoring man to a rightful relationship with Him. The Christian mission is to know and love Jesus Christ with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength and to go into all the trenches and marketplaces of the world to proclaim Him as Saviour and God. The whole world needs to hear this, the greatest message of love. Let us proclaim, whether as a goer, sender or mission partner, the only Saviour of all time.

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