The Problem and the Promise

We're now well into advent. And if you're like me and you didn't grow up in a traditional church and you don't know what Advent means, the word comes from the Latin word 'adventus' which means 'coming'. So at Advent the church has traditionally looked forward with a sense of growing anticipation to the celebration of Christ's coming at Christmas.

So up until Christmas that's what we're going to be doing. We will be taking a break from Luke's gospel and we're going to look specifically at Jesus' coming. And I've called this morning's message: The Problem and the Promise. Because if Advent is about anticipating Christ's coming, it's good to work out why He had to come in the first place. It's great to sing in the carols that Christ was born in Bethlehem, but why did He need to be born at all? Well, that's the first point:

What's the Problem?

Whilst there may be a few Grinches and Scrooges amongst us, I reckon that if we were to take a vote, most of us, probably, would vote in favour of Christmas. Because putting receiving presents aside, I reckon the majority of us enjoy Christmas for others reasons. For those of you who don't know the story, Charles Dickens wrote a story called A Christmas Carol. The main character is a man called Scrooge whose sole aim is to make money, but who has long lost any ability to enjoy it. This is how Dickens describes him: 'He was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner!'

But one Christmas Eve Scrooge's nephew pays him a visit at his offices to wish him a merry Christmas, but Scrooge is no fan of Christmas. And so his nephew is forced into defending it. Listen to what he says:

"I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come around – apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that – as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open up their shut up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it *has* done me good, and *will* do me good; and I say, God bless it!'

Which of course gets a cheer from Scrooge's clerk, Bob Cratchit in the next door room. But just listen to what Scrooge's nephew says, because in extolling the joy of Christmas he lays his finger on the mess we're all in.

He says that Christmas is the only time he knows of when men and women open up their shut up hearts freely, when they realize that those lower down the food chain than them are fellow passengers to the grave. In other words for the rest of the year people's hearts are closed, they're shut up to God and to others, they are more concerned about their own survival than that of those below them, and the reality of death and its unrelenting approach is given little or no thought.

Now you could probably add to Scrooge's nephew's diagnosis of what's wrong with mankind. But he's spot on in locating the problem. It's our heart. The outward stuff, the expressions of selfishness are just the symptoms, the real problem lies with the heart. As someone has famously said, 'the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.'

The apostle Paul puts it this way. He says that the problem with mankind is that we worship the wrong things. We have 'exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images' (Romans 1:23). Instead of worshipping God as God and living under His divine rule, we've rebelled and in His place worship a pantheon of other gods. Those might be real stone or wooden idols, or they may be the idols of the heart. Whichever it is, that's the root of mankind's problem. And as someone else has said, every other sin can be explained by the fact that we have broken the first commandment: 'You shall have no other gods before me' (Exodus 20:3).

But we put a multitude of other things before God, including ourselves. And the Bible spells out how it began. Our first parents were given one simple command in the garden, not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, - they could eat from any other tree, but not that one. But, at the instigation of the snake, the serpent, they broke that simple command and lost their innocence.

And that rebellion, that turning away from God, that failure to honour and worship God as God, has spread like a virus through the human race. Every heart is infected, with the most tragic consequences. Isaiah the prophet addressed the people of Israel, but his words are no less applicable to us when he said (Isaiah 59:2) 'Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you.' And the grave with its impending judgment, of which Scrooge's nephew spoke, is drawing ever closer.

That's what the problem is. But the good news of Christmas is that Jesus Christ came to deal with the problem. And in the Old Testament, written hundreds of years before Christ's coming, we see glimpses and shadows and predications and prophecies concerning His coming, and we're going to look at just a few of them to see how Jesus bridges the vast divide between us and our heavenly father.

The Promise:
And the first Old Testament promise I want us to look at is:

Christ is Coming for all Nations: In the first book of the Bible, in Genesis, God chooses a man called Abram. And just like every other man, he was an idol worshipper. Just like everyone else Abram had exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images, yet out of His grace God chose Abram, and made a covenant with him to bless him. And this is what Genesis 12:1-3 says: 'Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

Now up to this point Abram has not given anything to God, he hasn't earned this, he hasn't deserved it, but God calls him and tells him that He's going to bless him. That's grace. But this blessing to Abram is going to go far wider than just him or his family. God signals His intention to bless all nations, every people group on the face of the earth through Abram's offspring. That just as sin and death had spread to all people, so God intends that His blessing, the reversal of sin's curse, should also go global. Which means that whatever nation you're from, whatever people group you're associated with, this promise from God refers to you.

But how does God intend to bring that about? Well, as the story of God's dealings with His people develop, it becomes clear that He is going to send a Messiah, the Christ, which means 'the anointed one'. And this Messiah is going to come from Abram's family. And the first clue we get to how God is going to bring that about precedes even the calling of Abram. It's the promise of Christ the Coming Conqueror.

Christ the Coming Conqueror: The scene is the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve have just taken and eaten the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Mankind's problem of sin and rebellion is just a few minutes old, but already our first parents are trying to hide from God in the undergrowth, and they're pointing the finger and blaming each other. And God comes and addresses them and the snake who put them up to it. God tells them how things are going to be from this point forward, and He spells out for them the consequences of their sin. But as He does so He makes the very first messianic promise and it shines like a beacon in the dark night of the curse that falls on mankind: Genesis 3:15, God is talking to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel."

And God is talking there of something way more than a fear of snakes. Now, the passage doesn't say that this snake is satan, but from how he speaks and how he behaves, we can pretty much infer that's who this snake is, and God starts off with the general: there is going to be hostility between all the woman's offspring and all the snake's offspring, but then He gets personal and specific and referring to the woman's offspring God says 'He' (singular) 'will bruise your' (singular) head and you (singular) shall bruise his (singular) heel.

And that verse has been called the proto-evangelion, the first announcement of the gospel. Because what God is promising here is that at some point in the future a man is going to come who is going to place his foot on satan's head and crush it, but in doing so he will himself be bruised. By some means a man will come who will break the power of this serpent who has brought so much devastation into the world, but as he does so he will himself be harmed.

And Jesus wonderfully fulfills that promise. In Colossians 1:13-14 Paul writes that God 'has delivered us from the domain of darkness [from the grip and the power and the rule of satan] and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son [Jesus].' In other words, Paul says that Jesus has come and has plundered the

prisons of satan's domain. He has thrown open the doors of the devil's dungeons and proclaimed freedom for the captives.

And that has incredible implications for those of you who are Christians. Firstly, it means that satan no-longer has any hold on you. It's all past-tense. God has delivered you, He has transferred you. This isn't something He is in the process of doing, it's something He has done for you, as you put your faith in Jesus and you come alive by His spirit at work within you, this work of transfer is completed. Satan no longer has you in his grip. And now nothing, not even the powers of darkness, not even the schemes of the serpent, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But as the Old Testament story develops, this offspring of woman, this descendent of Abraham through whom all nations will be blessed and by whom satan's head will be crushed, begins to take shape and it becomes clear that when He comes, He's going to be a king.

Christ the Coming King: Fast forward, past Abraham, and past Moses, and the people of Israel, the descendents of Abraham are now settled in their own country and David, Israel's greatest king, has been crowned king. And David wants to build God a house, a temple, but God's response is 'thanks, but instead of you building me a house I'm going to build a house for you', and God promises that David's throne will be established forever.

Which sounds wonderful, except it all seems to go wrong. The people of Israel weren't a blessing to themselves, let alone to others and David's family - his descendents were no better, in fact at times they led the charge into sin and rebellion against God. And if you were looking on, you would have been forgiven for thinking God's promises to Abram and to David had come to nothing. And there is a lesson there for us, because if you consider your own personal situation, when you're facing stuff and it seems as though things aren't working out as they should, and you've tried to build your life on God's promises but it seems as if God's promises are coming to nothing. But the history of Israel tells us that God never loses His way.

And the prophets arise, and as well as calling the people of Israel to repentance, in the midst of national turmoil they see, they catch a glimpse of this coming king.

Listen to **Isaiah 9:1-7** written some 700 years before Christ.

Isaiah says a new dawn is coming. A light is going to dawn on those living in darkness, on those living in this dark night of sin and rebellion. But how? How is this going to come? By a child being born – this offspring of the woman, this offspring of Abraham, is going to come and He's going to come and rule on David's throne. He's coming to rule and to govern with justice and righteousness.

But listen to what Isaiah says about this coming King. His name will be called 'wonderful counselor, mighty God, Everlasting Father, prince of Peace.' Now,

could that be true? Could Isaiah have seen that right, or did the lenses of his prophetic glasses get steamed up there? Was he mistaken, could he really mean that this coming King, this child, this boy is going to be God himself?

Well that's what he said. And he finishes that passage by saying in v7 'The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will do this.' God is going to bring this about, His commitment to His plan of salvation is unwavering and God himself is going to come.

And while Isaiah gets to see a glimpse of who this coming King will be, the prophet Micah catches a glimpse of where He'll be born. Micah 5:2: But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.'

So far from God having lost his way, even the details are sorted. And sure God is the God of the big-picture, the grand narrative, the over-arching plan of salvation to rescue mankind from the mess we're in, but He's also the God of the details. That means He knows the circumstances of your life, Jesus says He even knows the number of hairs on your head, and for some of us, He doesn't have to count long to find out, and He knew where the Messiah, this coming King was going to be born.

And whilst people can get the wrong end of the stick about Christmas and we have pretty Bethlehem manger scenes and the like, the Bible is clear that this Jesus who was born in poverty in Bethlehem, born of Mary, an offspring of Abraham and a son of David, is the Lord. As the angels announced to the shepherds, He is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11). He's the King who was to come.

But He didn't come to rule over some earthly kingdom, that was the mistake His disciples made at first, His kingdom is far wider than that. Abraham Kuyper, the theologian, said this about Christ's Lordship: 'There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine''. And His claim to Lordship begins with our hearts. If He is to turn around the mess we are in, if He is to deal with the problem of our hearts, He must be enthroned as King upon them. If the first sin that got us all into this mess was a rebellion against God's good rule and command, the way back is by acknowledging His Lordship over our lives.

But alongside this golden thread of royalty woven through the Old Testament, there is a blood-red thread of a Messiah who will save us and redeem us by suffering.

Christ the Coming Saviour

And I want to give you just a few highlights from Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 53. As he writes of this Messiah to come:

v3: He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.

V4-6: Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our

transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

And Isaiah sees how God is going to deal with mankind's separation from Him, this gulf that exists between mankind - you and me and Isaiah and everyone else on one side - and God on the other. He sees how God is at one and the same time going to do justice to our sin, and at the same time reconcile us to Himself, and that is by sending a servant, a divinely appointed servant, who will be our substitute, who will take our place, on whom our sin will be placed and who will bear the wrath of God for us. His heel will be bruised, He will be crushed, He will be wounded, for our transgressions.

But how can these two threads be woven together: how can the golden thread of a conquering king and the blood-red thread of a suffering servant be brought together? The answer is: in Jesus. He is the King in the line of David; He is the ruler to be born in Bethlehem, and He is the servant who would suffer in our place. He is the offspring of Abraham through whom all nations will be blessed. And it is through His cross and His resurrection, dying in our place and being raised to life again, that He crushes satan's head, and frees us from his tyranny, and gains for us forgiveness of sins and reconciles us to our Heavenly Father.

And if the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart then all of us need new ones, and speaking through the Prophet Ezekiel, God promises to do just that in Ezekial 36:25-27, 'I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you.'

And as we put our faith and our trust in Christ as Saviour, as we look to Him who has paid the price for our sins and in so doing has broken the power of sin and satan over us, and as we humbly submit to Him as our Lord, the promise to Abraham that all nations will be blessed through him, becomes true for us. The problem is dealt with and the promise is fulfilled.