

"It was the right time" – I wonder what comes to your mind?

The politician will tell us it is the right time to be making cuts or pulling troops out of Iraq or Afghanistan.

Panorama will tell us that it was the right time to expose corruption in FIFA

The Estate agent will tell you it is exactly the right time to sell or buy according to what he wants you to do.

The footballer will tell us it was the right time to move on from one club to another.

The travel agent will tell us now is the right time to book next year's holiday.

I wouldn't be surprised if we were a little sceptical at all of these statements and wondering if there is another agenda.

When I read "But when the right time finally came, God sent his own Son" (Gal 4:4) again my eyebrows rise more than a little.

"The right time"? As I read it the whole of the events of that first Christmas seems to have a bit of the seats of the pants job about it doesn't it? It would appear that preparations were a little lacking? Someone somewhere had not got it sorted out. Who would arrange a pregnant woman just coming to term to be so far from home and only a donkey for transport? Yes OK the stable fits with the theological point but no one had booked it so there was no bed made up and it seems as if they were a little lucky to get there before circumstances overtook them. Also who needs a baby coming in the middle of the night and in the bleak midwinter?

It was very inconvenient. Then there were the shepherds. Nice to have them of course but a little advance notice, a bit of preparation and they could probably have got some sheep sitters in instead of leaving the sheep in the hills alone. It was a little inconvenient.

See what I mean? Someone had not got the preparations right. If they had then perhaps the 3 wise men would have arrived on time and not on the 12th day after Christmas. It does seem a little as if the birth of Jesus took quite a few people by surprise so it makes you wonder how come the Apostle Paul says according in that version of Gal 4.4 I mentioned earlier, "when the right time finally came God sent his own Son." If you ask me and probably Mary Joseph, the shepherds and wise men it seems to have been anything but the right time. It was inconvenient. There was a great suddenness about it. It came as a surprise nobody seems to have been ready for it.

1. A prepared event

However, of course, the birth of Christ, while it may in the actual event, have taken everyone by surprise, was not an event born of a sudden decision by God. Indeed as our passage shows us it was a prepared event. v4 here in the NIV reads, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son." There is no sense of suddenness here. No sense of unpreparedness. Rather the verse speaks of God waiting until the time had fully come, until the right time before the event of the birth of Christ into the world.

As we light our Advent candles they remind us very well of the preparations that God made. We are reminded of the promise of God of a coming Messiah and the prophetic message affirms God's will and plan. So here in Galatians the thread is of God preparing the way through the law for the coming of the one who would fulfil the law and open a new and living way to God the Father.

God did plan it and his preparations were long term.

In fact they were even more long term than ours are. We start our preparations for Christmas well in advance. In the January sales we are buying our Christmas cards. On our holidays in Spain we look out for some hideous ornaments to give away to people as presents and when Father Christmas arrives at the first Christmas Fayre in November then Christmas is here. We are well prepared. But God's preparations were even better laid. First he chose a man Abraham and gave to him the promise of a seed, descendants, and a land. In that call and those promises we see the first steps of preparation. That preparation took God many years as he led his people down to Egypt, then through Moses brought them out and made them a people, giving them the law v24 which was to shape them as a people making them distinctive but, because it was impossible to keep, pointing them to Jesus in whom they would find salvation from God's wrath. Over and again God used his prophets to remind the people of the Messiah to come. It didn't just happen it was a prepared event and those preparations had been going on a long time perhaps 2,000 years. Why was this the right time? Why was it considered that at this point in history the preparations had finished and the time had fully come? I cannot say. Some would suggest because there was in that part of the world a common language, Greek. That there were good roads built by the Romans and so on. I don't know. It was the time decided upon by God and that is what made it right. It might have been inconvenient for Mary and others but it had been prepared for by God and was the right time.

2. An historic event

Gal 4.4 "When the time had fully come, God sent his Son born of a woman." There is history here. The temptation with Christmas is to so dress the whole event in fantasy, the fantasy of Father Christmas, of Rudolph the red nose reindeer, of dreaming of white Christmases. All these things have an effect and so the Christmas story also becomes tinged with fantasy.

We need to be reminded that it was an historic event and our remembrance of it should centre round that historic event. Luke the Historian recorded it for us as a historic event. Now I accept that scholars have difficulty pinning down the date exactly and indeed sorting out all the details but Luke seems to have had no doubt about the historical events surrounding the birth of Jesus, which caused Mary and Joseph to be in Bethlehem at the time of the birth. The right time appears to have been when Caesar Augustus was Emperor (Luke 2:1) and Quirinius was Governor of Syria (Like 2:2).

When the time had fully come... it was a historic event but not only because it happened in history but also because it was an event that was to leave its mark indelibly on history. It was historic because it was unique. God was born of a woman. That is the Christmas event. God became human in a town called Bethlehem and from that point history was changed. Not just the date but the whole course, shape and destiny of the world because God had entered that world. The almighty God was born a baby. The infinite God entered into the finite world. The eternal God entered time. Let's celebrate that historic event but let's not allow it to be denigrated by tipping it over into fantasy and pretending that it was dreamed up by Walt Disney and so robbing it of its historicity, its impact and its significance for today. It was an historic event. When the right time finally came God sent His own Son born of a human mother.

3. A Redemption event

Finally it is a redemption event Gal 4.4&5, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons." God sent his Son into our world to redeem mankind that we might become his children. Faced with our sin and our inability to keep the law we need a Saviour who will redeem us who would buy us back from that slavery, who would pay

the price that is always necessary when something is to be redeemed and only Jesus Christ qualified to do that because only he was both God and man and because he alone fulfilled all the requirements of the law. And the price was his death in our place on a cross outside the city of Jerusalem in the 1st Century AD. That is why he came, to buy back people enslaved to sin and under the condemnation, the sentence to death, of a holy God. But not only to buy us back but also to establish us as sons and daughters of God with all the rights of access to a heavenly Father and all benefits that come from a heavenly Father and yes all the expectations of holy and right living that come from a heavenly Father. Jesus Christ came to enable us to have a relationship with our heavenly Father but he first had to overcome the rebellion and sin of humanity before we could be adopted as children of God. It was a redemption event because his birth is so inextricably bound up with his death.

When the right time finally came. It was a prepared event. It was an historic event. It was a redemption event.

4. The present implications

So what does it say to us? I think firstly it speaks to us of

a. the nature of our God.

It shows his love and patience. Love in wanting to put right the relationship which we humans had spoiled and patience in that his plan for salvation was worked out over many years through many imperfect people. For those of us who are worshipping God in Christ again this Christmas as we have done for many in the past perhaps we should stop and realise how long term the purposes and plans of God were, how intricate and detailed. It helps us to see more clearly the love of God shown in his plans and patience.

I wonder how much planning went into the presents are giving this Xmas? How much patience queuing in shops. These things in a sense are a sign of our love unless of course you are odd and like queuing in M&S. But how much greater is God's love shown in his planning and patience. As such it calls us to respond with praise and thanksgiving that our God should think we were worth such planning and patience.

Secondly I think it reminds us to continue to

b. hold onto the historicity of Christmas.

Of course I don't mind nativities where we get children dressed up as shepherds, angels and even donkeys and sheep. However, I think we do need to be careful in our own actions to make sure we hold as much as we can to the historical events of that first Christmas and to help others to remember it as well. Please don't get me wrong I don't want to take the fun out of Christmas I often took my children to Father's Christmas' grotto and encouraged them to leave out a sausage roll and pint of beer for him when they went to bed on Christmas eve. However I do want to keep reminding others, and especially those who may not go to church this Christmas that Christmas is about Jesus born in Bethlehem and not about Father Christmas.

Then thirdly

c. it reveals a Saviour

if today you know that you are not a follower of Jesus then this speaks to you. It reminds us that this historic event of the birth of Jesus is bound to the historical event of Good Friday and the cross with all its pain and sorrow. And as such it reminds us that that birth was a redemption event. It tells us that the babe born in Bethlehem died on a cross of wood so that you as well as many of us here might know the love and acceptance of God as a heavenly Father. Through these reminders perhaps today is the right time for you. The time to hear what God is saying to you about your life and your sin and to come to him through Jesus Christ and find forgiveness and acceptance, to become his adopted child. Don't say it is inconvenient. It is always inconvenient. It was inconvenient for Mary, Joseph the shepherds and the rest. But perhaps for some it will be a case of not being prepared well in the new year there will be Christianity Explored course to help think it through more. When the right time finally came God sent his son born of a human mother. Over these next few days we will celebrate that event; a prepared event, an historic event and a redemption event. Our prayer is that it will be the right time for some to come to know and love the living God.