

I want to offer a few words about Christmas deliveries. It seems to me there's lots of different types of deliveries going on at this moment. Of course, I was at the post office recently and it's clearly their busiest time of year given how long I had to wait in line. They're doing lots of deliveries. Lots of people like to send cards and presents this time of year. Maybe this year more than normal because we weren't there to give them in person.

I used to teach a year six class and it was in a church school, and I used to teach them religious education, and I asked them to write down what was special about Christmas. And one boy wrote this, "If you ask people what is special about Christmas, they would probably say presents. But the real answer is that Jesus was born. I prefer the presents." He got top marks for honesty. His primary concern, that young lad, was the deliveries made by Santa Claus at this time of year.

That's not my focus this morning. I can see three other types of delivery that are more significant for us this morning. They're all in the gospel set for today. The first is the delivery of a message. An angel comes to Joseph in a dream and told him what to do with his betrothed Mary. This is the only time that Joseph is center stage in a gospel story, but yet he plays a very key role in the whole narrative.

In first century Palestine, it was the custom for parents to arrange marriages and on completion of the marriage contract and the establishment of a bride price, the couple were legally bound. However, they often continued to live with their respective families until the marriage ceremony, after which the bride would move into the groom's house. And this period between the espousal and the wedding seems to be the situation that we find Mary and Joseph in in this story.

Now Joseph's plan A was to get married to Mary and to live happily ever after, but it's obvious from the beginning of our story that plan A wasn't working out for him. As it says before they lived together, Mary was found to be with child. Now

this was a big deal and infringement of the betrothal period was liable to a serious punishment, but Joseph being a righteous man had an alternative, he hatched a plan B.

He wasn't going to expose Mary to public disgrace. He planned, it says, to dismiss her quietly, but it's just when he had resolved to do this when an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and delivers him a message. Or to be more precise, the angel presents Joseph with an alternative, a plan C, "Take Mary as your wife and name the boy, Jesus," the angel said.

Joseph's plan B was a good plan. It came from a place of kindness, but it was still only a human plan that came from looking at the situation from a human perspective. The angel challenged Joseph to give up his plan and step out in faith and join with what God was doing, this amazing thing through Mary.

What we can learn from the story of Joseph is that God isn't just with us when our plans go the way that we expect or hope them to go, God can be working His purposes out when something seemingly bad happens, something that we'd never hoped for has happened. God can be there too. God was in Joseph's plan C.

Maya Angelou spoke often of her grandmother. She was a tall woman and Maya Angelou remembers her drawing herself up to her full height, hands clasped behind her back, looking into the distance and saying, "I will step out on the word of God." That's exactly what Joseph does here. He steps out on the word of God, the message that was delivered to him by an angel.

The second delivery in the passage is the most obvious one, the delivery of a baby. And it's strange, isn't it how we talk about babies being delivered? If you go to a hospital, they'll have a special place called the delivery ward where the babies are born. I've always celebrated Christmas as the delivery of a very special baby, the baby Jesus. As Paul says in Colossians, "God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him", which is an

amazing thought. Jesus was given lots of names, as Matthew says, and one of them was Emmanuel, "God with us".

Matthew records another name for Jesus, which points to the third and final type of delivery. The angel said to Joseph, "Mary will have a son and you are to name him Jesus because He will save or deliver His people from their sins." We can use the word delivered to mean to be saved or rescued from something.

Remember the Lord's prayer, "Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil." And it's good to think about this meaning of the word delivery too at this time of year, because it reminds us that the baby grew up. The baby Jesus didn't remain a baby, He was born for a purpose. He was not so much a man born to be King, as a man born to be a savior.

Let me read this passage from Paul's book of Colossians. "For in Jesus all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through Him, God was pleased to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of His cross."

Jesus came to put things right between us and God. The Christmas story is a story of salvation. Jesus came to restore the relationship that had been broken between humankind and God. This is the wonderful truth at the heart of the Christmas message. So three types of delivery, the delivery of a message, the delivery of a baby, and delivery from sins. Amen.