

Despite...

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Matt 19²³⁻²⁶ / Luke 2¹⁻⁷

Have you ever wondered what the biggest word in theology is? Let me tell you right now that I have never wondered that! So if you've never wondered that... don't you take another moment to concern yourself with it – though there are some big words in theology. Here's one of the longest words in English...

Antidisestablishmentarianism and it's a theological term meaning being against those who are for the disestablishment of the Anglican Church as the official state church of England. There is even a dictionary on line called the 'Dictionary of Big and Swollen Theological Words.' But the word which I am finding more and more relevant to my faith these days is a small word – perhaps even a tiny word and it's the word 'despite.' You see I realise more and more that despite who I am and what I've done, I am loved by God. And despite what I see in front of me, God loves my neighbour, my bad driving, mean spirited, rude and arrogant neighbour... just as much as God loves me. And despite how I've been treated by that neighbour, I am called to love him. And despite how I am feeling today I am still called to love and serve the people around me because despite how much I let God down I find His love remains constant despite my having trouble even believing that and, indeed, having trouble loving myself. And if you find that hard to believe try living with me for a while!

More and more I find these days that faith is a matter of 'despites' and it is so because the word 'despite' creates or describes the space between what we see in this life and what we get with God; what we deserve from God and what God's grace turns up with; what our intellect and our experience tell us is possible and what is possible with God for, as we read this morning... **'for God, all things are possible!'**

The Christmas story is a story of despites.

Many people find the story of Jesus hard to believe, perhaps you are one of them. And it's not just the historical question that people find difficult to cope with. I think most can handle the idea that a boy was born to a young woman, recently married, in very straightened circumstances, in a stable, in Bethlehem who grew to influence a lot of people in his area for a short period of time before he was killed by a brutal Roman regime. Many, perhaps most people are prepared to go this far. But of course these bare facts hardly begin to paint the picture of who Jesus really is. Indeed, the truth is, these bare facts actually work to conceal His identity more than they reveal it. Who is He?

He is Jesus, Son of God, King of Kings, Lord of lords; very God of very God, begotten not created. The alpha and omega of all things, the creative source of all there is... and all this must somehow be crammed into the earthly facts of His short earthly life. So much so that these small but reasonable pieces of information must take on an eternal significance which can hardly be supported by their very mortal framework. After all, how does one cram eternity into that which is very very ordinary? How does one infer eternity from such lowly beginnings and such a tragic end? The fact is that many cannot, because with Jesus one is left having to receive and accept these things **despite** the facts of His life and **despite**, particularly, the facts of His birth.

Ah, but Richard, you've left out the fact that Mary was a virgin, that Joseph miraculously chose to stay with her, that Jesus had prophesy spoken over him and was visited by Kings from afar. Don't these things make his divine nature more likely? Don't these things lessen the need for a 'despite?'

Not really. I mean they help but they don't overcome the distinct leap of faith that must be taken to go from the facts of Jesus' birth to the fact of His divine nature and reality. And, of course, for many of us, that leap doesn't seem so great. When you've been living with '**despite**' for some time, for years perhaps, you forget about the gap that it fills in. You forget about the gap between Jesus' humble birth and the truth of His Divine identity; you forget about distance between what was expected in a Messiah and what Jesus was; you forget about the claims to Royalty (King of Kings) and the relative poverty of His birth and life;

you forget about the distance between what we see and what we believe. And this is all very right and proper for, as Paul reminds us, we don't allow what we see to determine what we believe rather, ⁷**for we walk by faith, not by sight.** (2 Cor 5) We believe **despite** what we see and **despite** what we hear and **despite** what we experience and **despite** the tide of culture and self-worship we live in.

And if you think that I am pushing this a bit far just look at the 'despites' which are internal to the Christmas story. The woman Mary who accepted God's fate for her **despite** knowing how this would be seen by the culture around her as an unwed but engaged pregnant woman. The man Joseph who married her **despite** his embarrassment at finding her pregnant. The shepherds who visited **despite** having charge over valuable sheep who might have wandered and been lost or stolen by the time they returned. The Kings who visited from afar **despite** having to leave their Kingdoms behind and **despite** being targeted by Herod for extermination. The Prophetess Anna who worshipped God **despite** being widowed at such a young age and the prophet Simeon who stayed in the Temple **despite** his age because of a promise He would see the Saviour in the flesh before he died.

And what about the circumstances of his birth? Mary and Joseph went all the way from Nazareth in the north to Bethlehem in the south **despite** Mary being at full term. Bethlehem is 70 miles from Nazareth so it would have taken Mary and Joseph three to four days of travelling on rough roads on a donkey up to an elevation of about 2,550 feet above sea level. And **despite** how tired they must have been they found rest only in a stable and in that stable Mary gave birth **despite** the rigours of the last 4 days and the difficulties presented by her surroundings.

And let us not forget the biggest **despite** of all. In this birth the King of all Glory, the One through whom and by whom all things were made and sustained... became a human baby, became one of us.

And perhaps at this point you're thinking – so what Richard? We know all this. It isn't new. It isn't a surprise. We know and believe. Yes! We do know and believe.

But have we realised what this means? Have we realised that if this is the case the ‘despites’ don’t end here.

You see, our surety in all this; our familiarity with all this has obscured the reality of ‘despite.’ We accept the Christmas story as if it had no despites now and this is such a mistake friends for if we are to continue with Christ we must realise that despite is not just an out-of-place unwelcome visitor to our faith journey. Rather it is part of the very nature of faith to have to live with ‘**despite.**’

You see, just as with the Christmas story our faith today will have to contend with the discomfort of despite. We will have to believe **despite** the tide of unbelief which is now a characteristic of the culture we live in. And we will have to follow **despite** the many who will call us deluded and foolish. And we will worship only God **despite** the myriad of other more attractive gods to worship these days including the age old ones of beauty, wealth and power. And we will have to make decisions which we feel God calling us to **despite** them appearing illogical and unnecessary – like giving generously of our time or our talents. And we will need to face the constant pressure of living in a world where even nature can appear to work against **despite** our knowledge that God is a loving and gracious heavenly Father. And we will need to believe this also **despite** being treated abominably by others and even other Christian at times.

The truth is, just as the Christmas story is full of ‘**despites**’ so our story will be also; so **we** will have to contend with despite. And I want to say to you, on the eve of yet another New Year – everything will be alright but I know that despite having a loving God before us – you, and I, will have to live with **despites this year.** Perhaps the best thing to decide this Christmas is that we will journey together so that despite the despites – we will always have someone to share the journey with.

Despite everything, God still loves us, still waits for us, still longs for us to seek Him and know Him. Despite everything, the star of Christmas still shines. Will you walk with God this Christmas and this year... **despite everything? [Video]**