

God's Gift and Friendship

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[0 : 00] But before getting there, let me ask you to reflect for yourselves. How good are you at giving gifts? Honestly, my performance is fairly patchy.

A couple of particular low points spring to mind. My poor mom suffers the low points. When I was young and I had a little bit of money, I very excitedly went to the local gift shop, I came back to give my mom a lovely tax disc with some nice poetry on it.

Sounds great, doesn't it? Except for the fact that my mom couldn't drive and we didn't have a car. That was a slight fail. Another time, I remember going to visit my cousins for a week in the summer, came back with a gift that every mom surely would love, a key ring with a mobile sewing kit on it.

My mom's so gracious. She still has it to this day, I think. When it comes to giving gifts, it's something that can maybe make us feel a little bit anxious. Did we choose right?

Will they want it? Will they use it? Will it be just what they need? Will we see that person's face light up when they open the present or not? Thinking about it from the other side, what's at the top of your own personal wish list this Christmas?

[1 : 20] We all have one. Maybe they're just in our heads, but we all probably have one. How do you make it known? That's one of the challenges. Are you the kind of drop the subtle hint person, maybe a few weeks, even months before the time?

Are you at that stage where you simply just choose your own? Are you the right, a list kind of person? There's lots of different ways that we think on, what is it that I would want?

How would you fill in this blank this Christmas? I came across a little phrase from St. Augustine. Way back in the 5th century, you may have read Augustine's Confessions at school or university or somewhere.

He said this, and there's going to be a blank. Two things that are essential in this world, life and what? How would you fill that?

What would come next? Would it be the item at the top of your wish list, or would you think bigger? Let me tell you what Augustine said. Augustine said, two things are essential in this world, life and friendship.

[2 : 24] Interesting to reflect on that for ourselves. What I want us to do this evening, very briefly, is to consider God's great gift to us, what we think about at Christmas, his son Jesus coming to be Lord and Savior, and to see how that very much connects to the theme of friendship.

Because we discover in the Bible that one of the great news of Christmas is that Jesus invites us into friendship with God. In Matthew chapter 1 and verse 23, you read this, Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which translated means God with us.

See how in loads of carols you get that name, that title, Emmanuel, God with us. There is a loneliness epidemic in society, we're told.

Maybe we've experienced it. And certainly in our own local community around the church here in Edinburgh, that's certainly true. There are many elderly folks who feel isolated at home.

There are single parents who are lacking support. There are international students who move across the world and struggle to adapt to a new culture.

[3 : 42] There are many people around us living with a sense of sadness. I have no one to be with me in this moment in my life. One of the things, and maybe we've experienced this for ourselves, Christmas can do two things in our experience emotionally.

It can heighten our joy, absolutely, as we think about all the excitement and family, but it can also heighten our sorrow. So some of us will be looking forward to the big family meal and friends coming to share that with us perhaps, but for others, there's that sense of deep sadness because of who won't be at the table and coping with that sense of loss and sorrow.

You and I were made for friendship. We were made for community, for relationship. We were made to know and be known. That's one of the things that the Bible says to us right at the beginning.

But we know from experience often that friendships can become distant or strained, and they can be lost. So we struggle with that.

So the title of Jesus, Emmanuel, comes to us as a precious gift from God himself. God himself becomes one of us in Jesus to be the God who is with us.

[5 : 02] And that's good news for us because on the one hand, it reminds us that God in his goodness has sent Jesus to come and fix the broken relationship between people and God, that all is not well with us and God because of our sin and our guilt, and Jesus has come to deal with that.

And when we understand that and when we understand what Jesus has come to do, the result is that we're invited into a friendship with God himself. We're invited into this friendship that can never be lost and that can never be broken.

That we're invited into a friendship with Jesus himself who promises to his people, I will be with you always. Always. And so there is the good news of friendship with God that's offered at Christmas, that nobody need ever feel alone when we have Jesus in heaven as our Savior and our friend, the one who promises to be with us always.

So Jesus comes to offer that friendship with God, but the next question that we have is, well, how does he do that? And again, in our Christmas story, in Matthew chapter 1 and verse 21, we're told this.

This is the angel speaking to Joseph. She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

[6 : 25] There is a name there, Jesus, which means God saves. Hopefully that helps us to understand the mission of Jesus and the friendship that he offers.

So in our culture, the meaning of names is not such a big deal. I don't know whether you know the meaning of your own name. Some of us do, perhaps. In other cultures, it's a very big deal.

All kinds of hopes and promises tied up to a person's name. But for us, not such a big deal. But if you were to go back 2,000 years, go back to the time of Jesus for the ancient Jewish community, names were a really big deal.

Jesus' name means God saves. Jesus, we're told from the beginning, is a baby who will become a man who is on a mission, a mission to save.

And we're told in our Bible verse that he's come to save people from their sins. And that's important because it ties up to friendship. And when we think about some of the sins, some of the issues that we have in our own life, we think about selfishness, for example, or pride, or anger, or our lies, or lack of love.

[7 : 44] Those are things that cause friendships to suffer. Those are things that cause friendships sometimes to break down. Either we are responsible or another party is responsible, but either way, those kind of sins, those relational sins, cause real problems.

Now, when it comes to our relationship with God, what's clear from the Bible is that all the wrong is on our side. God has been a perfect friend, offering perfect friendship, but because of our failures, we have caused the relationship to break down.

With the result that, we're missing out on this true friendship that we were made for. That we should be friends of God, we should enjoy His love, but instead, we turn our back on God.

Sometimes we even treat God as if He were our enemy. And again, the solution to that breakdown is God's gift to us in giving us Jesus. Jesus comes on that mission to save us from our sin so He can bring us back to God.

Jesus talks about friendship. He defines friendship in this way. He says, greater love has no one than this, than that He lay down His life for His friend.

[8 : 59] So the mission of Jesus is to die for His friend. The mission of Jesus is to show just how much God loves the world He created.

We understand in our own friendships that there is an aspect of self-sacrifice that must lie at the heart of that. It can't just be all about what I want in a relationship.

We need to sacrifice for the other. And that's what we see perfectly in the life of Jesus. From His coming to be born in the stable to His going to die on the cross, Jesus is on that journey of self-sacrifice.

He's giving Himself to turn enemies into friends. He's dying to forgive us and to bring us peace with God. With the result that, when we enjoy friendship with God, we are never alone, nor are we ever unknown, wherever life happens to take us.

And we get to enjoy a love that lasts for now and that lasts for all eternity. There's one last benefit of friendship with God.

[10 : 10] When we have that ourselves, we can be better friends also to the people around us. It's generally true that we tend to become more like the people that we spend time with.

So if we spend time with Jesus, we'll begin to adopt His habits and His patterns. We'll invite others in. We'll respond to the loneliness that we see.

We'll seek to make peace with others. So maybe as we reflect on Christmas, as we reflect on gifts and what really matters, maybe we'll agree with Augustine that life, for sure, but also friendship are essential in our world.

Friendship with one another in our families, in our communities, but also the joy of friendship with God. God, as we humble as Hewan.

I'll see you next time. I'll see you next time. I'll see you next time. How about I'm going to find in your Crow tweet? Now, let's play for me. How about I'm going to play in my Monaten in my room for God?

[11 : 37] And I'm going to try