

Christmas - a reason to sing

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like to bring a message, a few thoughts for this evening before we close. There's going to be some refreshments afterwards, so don't fear that you've got to rush away.

But I thought we'd have a little think about something together before we all went home. And what I thought was that one of the excellent things about Christmas is music.

It hadn't quite dawned on me before, but Christmas, one of the things, it's a very musical time. Isn't it? So I looked up on Google, 10 most popular Christmas songs.

You find all these things on the internet, you know, the 10 most things to avoid, or the 7 Habits of Successful Leaders or something. So I found the 10 most popular Christmas songs, and it began with All I Want for Christmas is You by, who's this by?

Yeah, that's right. I hadn't realised that either. But there's all sorts of Christmas music, if you think of it. It ranges through Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Christmas song, isn't it?

[1 : 05] The Messiah, some of you might call to mind the Handel's Messiah. When I was at school, we sang this song, Once in Royal. I couldn't ever quite work out what the Royal was until I, in later life, realised that that's not the complete song title.

Once in Royal David's City. I'll get that now. But lots and lots of music. And actually, it's more specific than music.

It's singing. Christmas singing. And it struck me that there's something rather special about singing. It's something distinctively human.

Rocks don't sing. Cabbages don't sing. Nightingales, although the song says a nightingale sang in Barclays Square, it didn't actually sing.

It whistled, didn't it? And we have this thing of people recording a whale song. But again, that's not actually singing. It's squeaking.

[2 : 07] Marvellous though it may be. Because it seems to me the special thing about singing is it has words. Isn't that right? It's music and words put together. And it just strikes me that there is something uniquely human about singing.

We are the only creatures that sing. And that's what we've been doing this evening. We've been singing. And there's something deep in the human makeup and in the human heart which turns to song in certain occasions.

And I think there's a clue in this. I'm sure that the clever evolutionary scientists would say, oh, there's actually an evolutionary reason why we sing.

I mean, it seems a very far-fetched idea, doesn't it? But I think that the fact that we sing, we are singing creatures, is a clue to the fact that this world is more than just atoms and a chance evolutionary, that's the whole story of it, and cost-effectiveness and economics and politics.

There's something in singing which is transcendent, by which I mean it comes from another world really. Why do we sing? Why does every human being know what it is to sing?

[3 : 29] And you're going to go home disappointed by this, I'm sure many of you. But actually in the Christmas story, the angels don't sing. I know all the hymns say they sing, and all the carols say they sing, but in the Christmas story they say stuff.

And I'm pretty convinced that angels can't sing. It's only human beings that sing. This is a very special privilege of our human race, that we're able to sing.

And then that leads on to Christmas music. I'm thinking, is there something particularly about Christmas that gives people a reason to sing? And I think there is.

I think the Christian take on Christmas insists on singing. There's something about the Christian take on Christmas which says you've got to sing about it.

And of course that's why we have so many Christmas carols, isn't it? There's a disproportionate number of songs about Christmas. So we sang together just earlier, sing through all Jerusalem, Christ is born in Bethlehem.

[4 : 39] I don't think any of us is going to seriously take that advice and actually get on the plane and go to Jerusalem and sort of sing through all Jerusalem. But that's what the songwriter says. You want to sing about it.

You want to tell people about it. We were just, this song from Rotting Dean, Sing, sing, O earth. Sing, sing, O earth.

Eternal praises sing. There's something that sort of demands singing. Hark, the herald angels sing. Well actually they don't, but the hymn writer says, you know, listen, there is something singing going on.

The prophet Isaiah, in church we've been going through the book of the prophet Isaiah quite carefully and it's quite noticeable. He will explain what God's plan is and then he will take a breath and say, you need to sing about that.

And it crops up through the book. He keeps on saying you've got to sing. Sing for joy, O heavens. Shout aloud, O earth beneath. Burst into song, O mountains, is what Isaiah said.

[5 : 41] He's contradicting what I said when I said that rocks don't sing. But you know what he means. It's a sort of poetic thing. There's something you have to sing about. The only response to this is to sing.

So I'd like to offer to you three Christmas reasons why singing is totally in order and absolutely spot on.

So let's just take the bare facts of the coming of Christ. The angels saying this is something that's been prophesied and here this baby is Christ the Lord.

That's what it's all about in a nutshell. So I want to say three things that I think are prompts for singing. The first one is a prediction thing.

A prediction thing. That the way this jigsaw is put together, the coming of Jesus has been predicted a long, long, long time before.

[6 : 45] And you will have had that put forward to you. I hope you were convinced. I don't know whether you were. But right back from the book of Genesis there is a prediction. Through Isaiah there is a prediction. And so on.

There's a prediction thing going on. So Isaiah the prophet says the God who I represent is an expert in predicting things.

Put it to the test he says. And he predicts the exile in Babylon and he predicts the bringing back from exile. And he predicts the coming of the Christ. And he says nobody else can do this.

Only the God who I represent. And of course there's a reason for that. Because the God who he represents is a God who not only predicts the future but controls the future.

So it's not just a God who is good with advance information but the idea of a God who holds the world in his hand and steers it in a certain direction. The virgin will conceive and bear a son is what he said.

[7 : 51] I don't know whether at the time of writing he quite knew what that would look like but the New Testament says yep, that's exactly what happened when Jesus was born. And God is a God who predicts things.

And he predicts things because he is outside the system and can mould this system from the outside and controls the future.

And whatever else you might think about our politicians they're part of the system. They don't have almighty power to shape events from the outside. They just are working the best they can from the inside.

And this I think is a reason to sing. Because it says look, this world is not like a plane without a pilot heading who knows where. There's a God who holds the future.

Who holds the world. Who has a plan and tells us what that plan is. I think this is good news. Someone is in control and knows where he's headed and will bring us on board.

[9 : 01] Number one reason to sing. The prediction thing. Number two reason to sing. The baby thing. So there's a baby. The virgin will conceive and bear a son.

So this biblical prediction is of a human baby. Right back in Genesis it talks about the seed of the woman crushing the serpent's head.

And throughout the Bible the story tells us there will come a human. A baby. Now then just wind back your experience of babies or if you haven't yet had a baby just wind forward in your expectations of what babies will be like.

Let me just tell you from my dim memory babies are cute. They're also needy. 24 hour a day care babies need. I just point this out to you that if you haven't had this experience you can't turn them off.

You can't you know put them on to sleep mode because they won't do that when you want them to. And they're totally dependent and this is what babies are like. They're totally human.

[10:16] Totally dependent. And God says that's how I'm going to advance my purposes through a baby through a human and this human will go through that stage of being what humans are you know dependent.

And I think this is great news because it tells us that the God who runs everything is pro-human. He's pro-human.

He's interested in humanity. The God who made everything doesn't hate us. The God who made everything doesn't just want to condemn us and get rid of us.

The God who made us is not only interested in making us feel bad but he has come to earth for us. I think that's tremendous positive news.

It's something worth singing about that God who's made everything has taken the trouble and gone to the lengths of becoming human so that he can get right down where we need it for us and for our salvation.

[11:27] And of course there is further chapters in the story of baby Jesus. He is the God become human who will fully engage with the human predicament and pay the price for human sin in a human way by dying a human death.

He takes in himself where our first parent failed he will take those exact things and succeed and pay the price in a human way for us and for our salvation.

I think this baby thing is a tremendous reason to sing. Sing, sing, O earth. It's brilliant. Third reason. There's a kingdom thing going on.

The child that's born is not just a child not just a predicted child but he is born the Christ child and I don't want to take all your time trying to explain all the theology of what is meant by the Christ but let's just say in the Bible the Christ is a king he is someone of authority and as the New Testament unfolds the identity of Christ it just enlarges and enlarges what that means until there's no room for it to expand any further that this Christ child is the king of kings and the lord of lords all authority is given to him.

The angel says he will sit on the throne of his father David Isaiah says he will sit on the throne of his father David we sang once in royal David's city this David-ness this lineage from the royal family of ancient Israel is a key part of his identity and it tells us that the universe is not a republic but a monarchy that's what it's telling us that's the assertion that it's making that the secret behind this universe the truth behind this universe is not a republic where we all have our own say but a monarchy which is ruled by a king it's a kingdom with a king this is the way it's all set up isn't it?

[13:51] I don't know whether you are a fan of C.S. Lewis I love the Narnia books myself read them to our children and if you look back on the C.S. Lewis books as a grown up look again C.S. Lewis very perceptibly in his imaginary land of Narnia paints this picture that the world is only right when a king reigns the king who is in C.S. Lewis Lewis' way of putting it a son of Adam and when he comes all wrongs begin to be put right and this is the kingdom thing that's going on in the birth of Jesus I think this is actually a game changer because the claim is I'm trying to persuade you of it I don't know whether I'm succeeding the claim of this is that the ultimate cosmic truth is of a monarchy rather than a democracy life is not a question like it is in a democracy it's a great way of governing a country here on earth everybody has a vote everybody makes up their own mind you can vote the government out if you want to but ultimately the universe is not a democracy it's not where we will make up our own mind and do our own thing say this is what

I want to do it's a monarchy it has a king and the job of people in a monarchy is not to become shrewd voters but to become loyal subjects of course this is the claim of the Christ child I'm the king and the king says I want you to be my subjects that's what the kingdom's about so I've tried to give us three reasons to sing to have a happy joyful Christmas and I do want to wish you a happy joyful Christmas we thought about the prediction thing it's about a God who has the world in his hand it's about a baby thing the God who sets things right via the weakness and humanness of a baby and

paying the price humanly and thirdly it's a king thing the king envisaged if I can give you some Hebrew is a king of tzedek and a king of mishpat he loves justice and righteousness that's what he's going to do he's going to bring rightness into the human arena and the kingdom that he brings is the place where human beings flourish via a right relation to the king and I think that's a good reason to sing I don't know whether I persuaded you of those reasons but there they are and let's do what the what is the proper response to that to sing and we're going to sing glory to the newborn king this is our final song if you'd like to remain standing for a blessing at the end of this and then as I say don't feel that you have to rush off let's stand and sing hark the herald angels sing