

A Christmas Message

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[0:00] Well, we've got one more song to sing. Before that, I wanted to bring a few thoughts for a few minutes. A Christmas message. It sounds very posh. It sounds like I'm the Queen or something, doesn't it?

I thought of three people who, three of my friends who might come here this evening, and I thought, what would they think of this? They don't usually come to church. I wonder what they would think of this.

They might say, I enjoyed it. Mind you, I've heard this many times. I've got another friend who probably wouldn't come, and they would say, all this Christmas stuff is a sort of superstitious intrusion into an otherwise rational world.

And they would use the expression, evidence-based. I'd say, I will believe something that's evidence-based. And I've got another friend who would say something like this.

Loved coming along. It's great to get the Christmassy feel. And I always think of Christmassy feel, that film, It's a Wonderful Life. Do you know that film?

[1:08] It's got James Stewart in it, doesn't he? Oh, she here, she here. So I thought, if I had a couple of minutes this evening to say something to my three friends, what would I say?

So I thought this, for the first one, mind you, I've heard it many times before. And I thought, well, yes, I agree with you. It's sometimes difficult to keep things fresh and urgent.

And you might say, well, it's all much the same. It's become rather a bland thing in my experience. Yeah, it is sometimes difficult to keep things fresh and urgent.

That's the reason why we have things like birthdays and anniversaries, isn't it? So that something important that happened in the past is brought to mind, and you think, yeah, that was good.

That's what birthdays are for, isn't it? Not just to clock up your increasing age, but say, you know, it's good that you're here. Another year, I'm glad that you're born.

[2:16] Many happy returns of the day. And anniversaries are meant to do the same thing. You know, we've been married so many years, and we've had our ups and downs, but here we are, and we're glad about it.

And those things freshen that up. Because, of course, an event in the past does not mean it has no importance in the present.

That would be a very foolish thing to think. Let me give you two examples. You will have different reactions to these, of course, but the Brexit vote is a thing in the past.

But we certainly can't say, oh, well, that's in the past, doesn't really matter, because it affects everything. And as we see, our politicians are turning cartwheels, trying to make this thing that was decided in the past work in the present.

And you think of the election of Donald Trump. You might be very much for him. You might have other views. But you can't say, oh, well, that's in the past. That doesn't matter. And by the same token, the birth of Jesus is something in the past, quite a long way in the past now, but that doesn't mean it doesn't matter.

[3:28] It doesn't mean that it's not important and urgent. Following Brexit, following the election of Donald Trump, the world will never be the same. And, of course, that's true.

Following the birth of Jesus, the world will never be the same. There was a time in which an angel came into the atmosphere of this world and said, you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, lying in a manger.

And the impact of that statement is touched on in what the angel went on to say, glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.

The coming of Jesus cast a shadow of favor over our planet, over our different races, over our different ethnicities.

God said, I've got good things for you. It's in the past. That doesn't mean it isn't relevant and it isn't important. So that's what I'd say to that friend.

[4 : 42] That's my little couple of minutes to that friend. To my friend who says, oh, well, it's superstitious. It's an intrusion into the real world, the evidence-based world, the real world that forms the basis for real things.

And you might be thinking a bit of that yourself. But of course, what I would say to that friend is, it does depend on what you call the real world, doesn't it? I was trained as a physicist.

And I have friends who are trained as engineers. An engineer's definition of the real world, or an electronic engineer's definition of the real world, is any voltage higher than 5 volts and any current more than 200 milliamps.

I think that's a strange definition of the real world. What scientists tend to say is the real world is the things that can be measured with some sort of ruler, even if it's a very expensive laser-powered ruler, or seen under a microscope or at the end of a telescope.

That is the scientific version of the real world. Don't be taken in by it. That's a very limited definition. Because you can't... There are lots of real things that you can't put under the microscope or measure with a ruler or a laser.

[6 : 08] Scientists can't detect love. But we all know it's real. Scientists can't measure beauty. But we know, as human beings, there is such a thing as beauty that we are moved by.

Scientific procedures now cannot go back in time and take photographs of angels. Scientists can't expect in a laboratory to duplicate a miracle done by Jesus.

No amount of water and science will produce wine the way that Jesus turned water into wine.

They're unique events in history. Doesn't mean they're not real.

Christianity has lots of evidence. But it is of a certain sort. It's the evidence, for example, of changed lives. It's the evidence that says, here is a key.

And it fits the whole thing of the world with its beauty and its problems and people and sunsets.

What other key unlocks that other than the story of the Bible of a God who made everything, human beings who've turned away from God and a Savior who's come to bring us back.

[7 : 27] The evidence that we've had put before us this evening is the testimony of honest people in the past. So Maria read to us from Luke's Gospel and he, at the beginning of his book, says, I've researched this, I've checked it, and I've written so that you can know the certainty of these things.

That is evidence. That's the real world. The real world is the one in which God has acted to show and confirm his favor to our needy race.

That's what I'd say to that second friend. And the third friend, who liked the Christmassy feel. I like Christmassy.

Don't you like Christmassy? So, It's a Wonderful Life and a Christmas Carol. Will you be planning to watch a Christmas Carol? It's on the telly.

I like the one with Patrick Stewart. I keep on expecting him to say, Make it so, number one. But of course, he's not going to do that in the Christmas Carol. But there's a bit where he plays Scrooge in that particular movie, doesn't he?

[8 : 40] And he's transformed by his encounters and he wakes up on Christmas morning and says, It makes the blood sing. Get me that turkey, or whatever it is. That's, I sort of wish I hadn't gone down that road now.

But, it's a sort of Christmassy movie. And, I think we're all in favour of the warm, Christmassy feelings, the goodwill feelings.

Of course, there's lots of feelings in the story that was read to us. Actually, there's quite a variety.

When the angel came to Mary, she was, it says, greatly troubled.

Because there's something a bit challenging about the real Christmas. It says, actually, the shepherds felt terrified. There's something rather intimidating about the real God when he steps into people's lives.

The angel said, it's good news of great joy. And I think we've felt something of that in our singing this evening. that the music itself conveys the magnificence of the joy of this message.

[9 : 55] And, as Maria read on, when the shepherds went and told the townspeople what had happened, they were amazed. So, that's a proper reaction to Christmas.

It is amazing. It's actually more amazing than thinking that Father Christmas comes down the chimney and leaves children presents. The real Christmas is more Christmassy than, do you see what I mean?

There's, it's an amazing thing. So, I'm all in favor of feeling Christmassy in that sense. Feelings and moods, I would say, let's make sure our feelings and moods are a response to something that's true and that goes deeper and lasts longer than the feeling or mood itself.

Let's look at the thing that causes us to be amazed, that causes us to be so joyful or so intimidated. And the Christmas story gives us that.

the coming of Jesus gives us that. And I hope you do feel Christmassy in the right sense. But I hope you won't miss the fact that the events that we're thinking of, the coming of Jesus, apply all year round.

[11:15] They're not something that just gets switched on for a couple of weeks and then switched off again. Jesus came to save us, to save us from our sins, to save us from the grave.

That is an abiding truth which I think makes us tremble, makes us joyful, makes us amazed. There is another song, it's actually an Easter song, which says that to truly understand the impact of these events, this is what the songwriter said in his view, his response, love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

That's what Christmas really calls on us to do. That's what it asks of us. Let's sing our final song.

Let's sing our ending.

Thank you.