

A spiritual Christmas

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[0 : 00] Well, every year I wonder quite what to say at this point. And I had an interesting conversation! the other week with one of my friends that I worked with on various projects. And we talked! about spirituality. And although Brighton is renowned in the census, I think for being the main stronghold of the Jedi religion, I think that's correct, isn't it, on the national census. But there is a lot of spirituality in Brighton. And I thought, talking to my friend about this, what sort of spirituality does the Christmas story have to it? What does it say into a town, a city, a culture like ours? What sort of spirituality is Christmas? So my first thing to say is, I think there is spirituality in Christmas. And I distinguish that from gullibility.

Gullibility is when you believe anything and everything that anybody tells you, any daft thing. I don't think Christmas is a daft thing. There is a spiritual content to it. And I think probably most of us would agree that life is not just about stuff and things. And if we come to Christmas, I think many of us would say, it isn't just about the amount of Lego that kids get, or the amount of iPods and whatever they are that we get in our Christmas stocking. There's more to it than that. And I would like to put forward the case that if we miss out spirituality from Christmas, we've really missed something very, very important. So what sort of spirituality does Christmas have?

So my first thought on this is that it is person addressing. And you might think, well, that's a very strange thing to say. What I'm trying to say from this is that the God who is behind the Christmas story is a God who speaks to people. It's a God who speaks to people. You think of the angel coming to Mary and speaking to her and her situation particularly. And you probably might not be able to draw these things to mind, but in Luke's gospel, as he tells us the story, there's a couple that God sends an angel to. There's a Joseph and Mary that God sends the angel to, to Mary, and in a dream to Joseph. And God speaks to people individually. So that's not the same thing as a spirituality just of power. I think probably the name for a spirituality of power would be magic. It's not concerned with your heart so much as what power you can cause to whatever, heal, I suppose if you're using it maliciously to attack. But the God of the Bible, the spirituality of the Bible is not just about power, it's about people. And the deep truth about the God of the Bible is he is a person with thoughts and emotions, with wisdom, with individuality and creativity.

And he addresses himself to us because the Bible says we're made like him. And addressing people is not the same thing as envisaging the world as just full of sort of a sea of consciousness. I agree there's common ground there, but consciousness isn't quite the same thing as being a person. It's not an aim just to make one big spiritual splurge of consciousness. It's God, a person addressing people. So that's my first thought about spirituality.

A second thing is that the spirituality of Christmas is of a God who comes into the world from outside it. That's the idea, isn't it? The baby being born is not so much like a birth in the ordinary sense as an entrance into this world. He, so we're told, so we're asked to believe, existed outside this world and came into this world to be born as a baby.

[4 : 53] That means an awful lot about who God is. He's not just like us. He's not something that we have made up.

He's not a created thing. He is outside and he has stepped into our world through Jesus Christ. And such a God can't be proven or disproven by science. Science has to do with the stuff in this world, measuring it, assessing it, and so on. But the claim is that the God that we're talking about in this spirituality is a God who is outside the world and who steps into it in this particular way.

So if you are thinking, oh, I've got this all sewn up, God doesn't exist. I'm going to ask you, and I think this Christmas story asks you to think again about that.

How do you know he doesn't exist? What sort of tests do you think you can use to prove that?

Because all the tests that we can muster are inside this world. But the God who we're thinking about at Christmas lives outside this world and comes into it.

[6 : 23] It's like living at the bottom of a mine and saying there's no such thing as daylight and trees. Well, if you live in the bottom of a mine, you're not going to see them, are you?

Here's another thought. The spirituality of Christmas is embedded in history. And that's why we had those readings to show us, to remind us, that the coming of Jesus as a baby is not just a one-off thing linked to nothing, meaning whatever you want it to mean.

It's actually part of a very complex and rich tapestry running through history, starting at the beginning of humankind, as we read, and working through as God chooses to work through different families, different individuals, and a particular nation.

It pleased him to do that. And the understanding of the coming of Jesus actually involves us in diving into a very rich story of God's dealings with people through history, here and there and there and there and there, all building up into a very big picture.

And because it's historical, it certainly depends on the testimony of people in history. It depends on the things that were written down through history.

[8 : 04] But because it's historical, it's not the same as a scientific proof. Just coming back to that scientific thought again. What science can actually prove is really very, very limited.

Scientific proofs can do a certain amount, but only in a very limited field. I don't think a scientist can prove the existence of love. But I'd be very surprised if you didn't believe in the existence of love.

The spirituality of Christmas is embedded in history. And it's fundamentally about rescue.

So the angel says that Jesus is a saviour. This has at least two sides to it.

One side is very unflattering to us. It says that God thinks we need saving. He wouldn't have sent a saviour otherwise, would he? God thinks we need saving.

[9 : 11] And that is an offensive thing. I'm sorry, I can't get rid of the offensiveness of Christianity. It just has that side to it.

Because it says the relevance of Jesus to any man or woman or boy or girl is that he can save you. And of course, if we find ourselves saying, well, I don't want to be saved.

I don't need saving. I'm perfectly all right on my own. And of course, we can possibly take offence at the provision of a saviour.

And the sort of salvation that Jesus comes to bring is in the realm of moral and spiritual redemption. See, it's good news. It's a redeeming story.

That's what makes it so brilliant. The thing that he comes to redeem us from, like we were saying, is sin and death. And rebellion against God and moral failure.

[10 : 16] And of course, it's perfectly possible for people to say, well, none of that applies to me. But it does. He sent a saviour because we need saving.

And the other side of that, of course, is that God is willing to save. And we have painted for us the picture of a God who looks on our world with all its mess and trouble and rebellion and confusion and obnoxiousness and everything else that we human beings are capable of.

And says, I am willing to come and rescue these people. Which to me is enormous good news.

And I think is the reason why the Christmas songs are joyful. So that Copper family one, I think, is really joyful. Sing all earth.

Eternal praises sing to our Redeemer and our Heavenly King. And one more thing about this Christmas story.

[11 : 28] It isn't an off-putting story. It isn't a story that says, go away. Not interested in you. You needn't be interested in it. It's a story which invites further engagement.

So you just have to think of the shepherds. God went out of his way to tell the shepherds what was going on. Didn't he? To explain to them how they could get in on the action by going to Bethlehem and seeing the baby.

And he invited them to take him up on that offer. If you go, you'll see. You'll know you're in the right place because you'll see a child laid in swaddling clothes lying in a manger.

And if you remember what was read to us, they did. They went. They took God at his word. They took some steps of faith. They went off and found it was true. And that seems to me to be exactly what it is to go further, to invite further engagement.

And the shepherds were promised that they would find what God had described. And they did. Of course, they found far more than that. Because the person who was lying in the manger was far

greater than just an ordinary baby.

[12 : 51] And I would go so far as to say that if you take all the promises that surround Jesus Christ, they're actually promises which are better, breathtakingly better, than any of us could imagine.

Because the promises that Jesus makes don't just extend into this world, nor indeed into our own private worlds, but extend to the remaking of everything in the world that's gone wrong.

The remaking of everything. Which are promises better than any of us could imagine? Well, there are my thoughts for the spirituality of Christmas. I've said that I think it is spiritual.

And I've said that it's a God who speaks to people. Maybe you've got a sense that God is speaking to you tonight. It's a God who comes from outside.

He's an other God. He's greater. Greater by far than we are. It's not something that we've made up. It's a God who's chosen to embed his work in history. And we can read the history of it and come to convictions about that.

[14 : 00] It's a spirituality fundamentally about rescuing us, saving us, which challenges us to have the humility to say, well, I do need saving, but encourages us that God is willing to do that.

And it's something that invites further engagement. And it's great to see everybody this evening. I would be a little bit disappointed if, for you, the only engagement with spiritual things like this was just once a year.

I think it's so important, so colossal, that the right response is to say, I need to get this sorted out.

I need to find out about this Jesus properly. And God invites us to engage further with him.

Well, those are my thoughts. Thank you very much for listening. We're going to sing our last song. And there's...