

Why do we celebrate at Christmas?

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Date: 21 December 2014

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[0 : 01] Well, I'm going to take this opportunity to say a few words, a Christmas message, before! we have our last song and a closing prayer. And I thought I'd ask the question, why is! Christmas time a time for celebration? Because the songs we've all been singing are songs of celebration. And why is that the case? And I want to say straight away, I know it isn't always the case for everybody. Things in life, bereavement, loneliness, various circumstances can mean that not everybody feels that Christmas is a time for celebrating, and I do want to be sensitive to that fact. But having said that, in general, it's a time for celebrating, meeting up, as we're doing now, meeting with family perhaps, enjoying good food and drink, giving and receiving gifts. And it is called the festive season, isn't it? And rightly so. And I think this gains its impetus from the Christian strand of Christmas. And before you say, well, there's lots of other things going on at Christmas, it isn't all Christian,

I know that's the case. There's lots of strands in this particular season. It can be a bit confusing, can't it? In some ways, it's a midwinter celebration, and many people have gone to the burning of the, what are they burning? Clocks. Yes, the solstice. I nearly said burning of the boats, but I knew that wasn't right. But having said all that, the season is still called Christmas, because its roots are in Christianity. And certainly in the story that we've had read, the accounts that we've had read, the angels thought it was an event to celebrate. And the angels, we quote, do not be afraid, I bring you good news of great joy. So the angels thought it was a time to celebrate. So why is Christmas a time for celebration? And I've got three thoughts on this.

And number one is the thought about goodwill, because what Christmas shows, what the coming of Jesus Christ shows, is God's goodwill to humanity. The angels said, on earth peace to men, I'm including humankind, on whom his favour rests. And there's something very profound and very significant about God's favour, resting on humankind. And perhaps I can illustrate it by the parable of two rented houses.

One is the house next door to my house in Shaftesbury Road, that's a rented house. And the other is my son's house, where he had a rented house in Finsbury. Finsbury, am I saying the right word? Finsbury Park.

Okay. Well, next door to me is a rented house. It's a terraced house, it's in three flats, and the landlord is called Adrian. And when a fault occurs, as does happen with houses, is he interested? What happens when the tenants call him up? Is there any goodwill on his part?

[3 : 25] Well, that's one question. I'll take you now to Finsbury Park, where my son had a student house, and in that house they had rats. So they had this feature that, as they went to sleep at night, they could hear little scurrying noises in the wall. And it took them quite a while to work out what this was, but in the end, after a year or two, they worked out it was rats.

And they notified the letting agent, and he said, no problem, we'll deal with it. And he notified the owner in the Bahamas. Well, what was the result? Well, let's take you back to Adrian. I've got quite a good relationship with Adrian, and I've said to him, if ever you come and visit your tenants, be sure and knock on my door, and if I'm not doing something else, I'll give you a cup of tea. And sure enough, Adrian came round and looked at the problem. Compare it with my son's landlord, who stayed in the Bahamas, and he sent round the letting agents, and the letting agent said, it's not our fault, it's your fault. And he blamed the tenants for the rat problem. So I ask you, which of these landlords would you prefer? Which of these two landlords showed he cared? Which of these two landlords showed goodwill? And I think you'd say the answer was Adrian, because he turned up, because he came over, he came down. And if I was one of those tenants and the landlord came, I would say, hooray, celebration. The landlord's come to sort out the problem. And I think that's one of the reasons why Christmas is a time of celebration, because the landlord himself,

the owner of the cosmos, has come down to visit us, to find out what the problem is. And I think that's a great reason for celebration. So number one, it's to do with goodwill. Number two, reason for celebration. Because there's been long delays and a long time of preparation. Now, if you've ever done any painting and decorating, you will know that the key thing is not slapping on the last coat of paint, but the key thing is preparing the surfaces. It's preparation. That's the key thing.

[5 : 51] Let me give you the example of the open market. Have you been to the open market? Do you know where the open market is? You know what I'm talking about? Well, for a long time, in previous years, if you popped in at the open market, the traders would have said, oh, trade's very bad. It's a neglected place.

People don't come here anymore. Can't make a livelihood out of this. And do you remember when they modernized it with those things that looked like dinghy sales stretched across the market stalls?

Do you remember that? And how they didn't work and the market traders used bits of plastic sheeting to make sure that rain didn't fall on their customers? You don't remember that, do you? Well, that was the bad old days. And during those bad old days, there were plans and negotiations and more plans and more negotiations and planning permission and more planning permission and getting the finance together. And then there came a time when the old open market was all knocked down.

Do you remember that? When you suddenly could see across from the level to St. Peter's and you could think, there's this vast area of open space. It was all knocked down. And then it started to be rebuilt.

[7 : 14] I happened to know one of the people who lived in Baker Street. And she had had this experience of suddenly finding from her back bedroom window, she could see all across Brighton. Fantastic.

And then when they started rebuilding the new one, all she could see was a wall two feet away from her window, which she wasn't too pleased about. But it was rebuilt. And there came a time for the grand reopening. Does anybody go to the grand opening of the level?

Yeah, it was really fantastic. Grand opening of the open market. Yeah, it was fantastic. It was a celebration. They had a Chinese dragon. And they had the Lord Lieutenant. And they even had Jason Kit Kat, who came along with his shopping basket. I know he was there because I made sure I had my, I had a photo of him. So he was, so it was a day of celebration. And part of the intensity of the celebration was just how long it had been prepared for. Just how many hopes and fears and plans and preparation had been put in. Hooray, the grand opening. And I want to say that that's true about Christmas.

Because if you noticed in that reading from Genesis, there was a promise of the Savior coming. And the plans were put into operation all those centuries, all those millennia ago, foretold from the very beginning. And those promises, if you read the Bible, if you research the Bible, you'll find that the promises go all the way through to the point where the promise was a whole family big, a whole family wide. Abraham. Remember Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the fathers there. And then the promises were one nationwide, where God's favored nation was Israel. And he worked with them. And then the promises seemed to disappear altogether. When Israel went into exile, it all seemed to have come to a stop. And then the promises reappeared. And on Christmas Day, on that day when Jesus was born, the promises were fulfilled.

And I think that's a reason why the angels said, this is good news of great joy. We've been waiting for this so long. And the day has finally come. Whoopee. It's a celebration. That's my second thought on why it's a celebration. And good news. Now here's my third point. Which is, I think, a more difficult point for me to make. So I'll try and do my best on this. The third point is this, that Jesus comes as a Savior Savior, at the point where we actually need saving. So suppose, for example, that you saw on the news tomorrow, wonderful update, a cure for cancer has been discovered. A cure for cancer has been discovered. And I say for many people, they'd say that's fantastic news. Although I have to say, a number of people would be left unmoved. And they might be saying, well, I don't have cancer.

[10 : 47] I'm not going to get cancer. And it's irrelevant to me. Now I have to say, that would be a little bit short-sighted and a little bit self-centered, I would have thought. But you could understand that people might say, well, it doesn't include me.

Because I don't suffer from that particular problem. Let's hold that illustration for the moment. I'm saying that Jesus comes to save at the point where we actually need saving. He comes to save us from the moral and spiritual failure that is the real enemy of human fulfillment.

So let's think about that just for a moment. I think he is the right sort of savior. He comes to save where we need saving. Just think of other saviors that don't do it. I mean, politicians, for example. Now the best politicians realize their own limitations. That's wisdom for politicians.

But I have to say, I don't think they all believe their limitations. I think some of them actually believe their own propaganda. And when politicians begin to say, we can solve the world's deepest problems and make people totally fulfilled and happy, rather than just saying we can make the trains run on time. When they make those grandiose claims, you think, I don't think you're going to make it. You're claiming to be the savior. And it won't happen. And I think I could, you can probably think of multiple examples of a politician that's or politicians that have come into office with a great acclaim, almost messianic. And then a few years later, total disappointment. I think Barack Obama would be a case in point, wouldn't it? Or think of people who claim to save us financially.

We can run the economy. If we get the economy right, then everybody will be happy and everything will be wonderful. And how hollow those promises have turned out to be.

[12:54] So those saviors don't work. I think Jesus doesn't claim to be a politician and he doesn't claim to be an economist. He claims to be a savior in the moral and spiritual realm. He really does save us from a real need. Now, let's think about that need. Because of course, Christmas isn't the only thing that's true about Jesus. When he was born, he lived and he died. And Christians can never get away from the truth that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross is the focus of the solution to the human problem of guilt and moral failure and sin. And the cross of Jesus Christ, so we're told in the Bible, is the sacrifice where all the awfulness and guilt, the awfulness and guilt, punishment of sin was sort of funneled onto Jesus for those hours that he died. And that is Jesus being a savior. So let me come back to this example.

And I'm conscious this is rather a sensitive way of illustrating it. And I really try to think of another illustration, but this is the one that I came up with. So let's come back to this example of cancer. Have you seen the, there's been some TV adverts to say, if you have blood in your pee, to go and see the doctor. Have you seen those adverts? A little bit unpleasant. Sorry about this unpleasant illustration. So the idea is to say that people might have that problem and say, well, it's not a problem. You know, it's just, I'm just having an off day. But they're trying to say, actually, that might be something really serious. So if you notice that, go to the doctor. The doctor might take some sort of sample, send it off to be tested. And that would indicate whether you really do or don't have a very serious disease. And I want to liken that to the moral problems of the human race.

Because the tendency is that we think, well, we don't have this disease of sin. A few people have it. So we think of notorious people like Jimmy Savile, for example, who we all thought was wonderful. And then we turn out to find he was horrible. We think, well, he was, he had that sort of problem of sin.

Or we might say, well, the Taliban, they're obviously terrible people murdering children. So they've got this cancer of sin. And I want to say, yeah, that there are some particularly awful things that are done. But then we look into our lives and the little indicators. Lust. We say, well, that's just natural. Hatred, cruelty. We say, well, that's other people's problem. They're nasty people to me. The way we ignore God, and we just say, well, I'm just not particularly religious.

All these are little indicators that God says, I think you might have a problem there. I think you need to come and consult with me and have some tests done. And you know, in the Bible, it says God's taken a sample, as it were, from each of us, and he's got the results.

[16:19] And I'm sorry to say, the results aren't good. The results of God's diagnosis is that each and every one of us has the problem of sin. Me, you, everybody. We all have this problem of sin, and we all need a powerful solution and a powerful saviour. And that, I think, is the third reason why the Bible is so categorical. This is great news. It's great news because everybody needs a great saviour. And you might be saying, well, I liked the first two points, didn't like this point so much, and I can see you're a strong-minded and independent thinking person, and I respect that.

But maybe you're thinking, I find that third point a little bit difficult, but I do like the idea about Jesus. And there is something going on with Jesus that I would like to know more.

And I'm going to just now wish you a very happy Christmas, and wish that the joy and the goodness of Christmas would overflow into each and every life here, and those that you love. And I want to

add a suggestion for the new year. And my suggestion for the new year is, have you ever thought about following up on Christmas in the new year? And you start to say, how do you do that? Well, you could actually read the bits of the Bible that follow on from the Christmas story. And we've actually got a program in the church whereby you could take a gospel, John's gospel, and somebody will read it through with you. I've got a book and a program, and several people have done that and really appreciated it. So I'm going to leave that with you as a suggestion for new year. And come and have a word with me if you'd like to do that. But here's the thought then, celebration is right. God shows his goodwill. It's something that he's promised long and was worth waiting for, and is, I'm saying, a wonderful remedy for a real problem. And a happy Christmas to you, and thank you very much for listening. Let's sing our last song.
[18 : 41] Let's sing our last song.