

Family Carols

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[0:00] We live in a world of many religions, many sort of religious practices, prayers, even the BBC will say prayers were said on such and such an occasion.

! People pray, people use techniques of meditation, of course the current fashion for mindfulness. People have views about morality, observance,!

Things that are right and wrong. We even have our own sort of secular versions of religion, religious-like belief. You might say, what are the basis of these so tenaciously held views on human rights?

Where does that come from? It doesn't come from evolution, does it? Are all these religions the same? Are all these views the same? Do they much come to the same thing? Well, of course, as a Christian, I'm going to say, no, that's not true at all. Christmas is linked with the birth of Jesus Christ, and that's the Christian claim.

And I'd like us to ask the question, is there anything distinctive then about Christianity? Or is it much the same as any other set of beliefs? And is there anything that is key to true, essential Christianity that you could use to test things by?

[1:23] And in order to do that, I'd like us to look into the Christmas story. If you have a Bible there, you'd find it helpful to turn to the bits that were read. The Christmas story is actually quite a long story and quite an involved story, and I'm not looking at the usual bits this morning.

We'll look at some of the usual bits this evening, and you're welcome to come along to that, and no doubt we will continue to look through that as Ben leads us on Christmas morning. But I wanted to look at the way the story is told by Luke, the writer of Luke's Gospel, and to see the way he tells us about the birth of Jesus.

He doesn't use philosophical concepts. John's Gospel probably, you could say, does. He's not talking abstract theology. He's not trying to describe or explain Jesus as truly man and truly God, what we'd call the incarnation.

That's not where he's focusing, but of course these things are wonderfully important. That's not to say that they're absent or they're not true, but it's just not the way he tells us what he thinks is important for us to hear.

The way he tells us is in terms of family connections, a connected family, and that's what I'd like us to look at. He tells us the story of this couple. They certainly work in Jerusalem because he's a priest, Zechariah and Elizabeth, so I've drawn there.

[2:52] Zechariah's meant to be that one, Elizabeth's meant to be that one. Zechariah's meant to be that one.

So we're going to look at those two couples as they're described to us in this story, and we'll just try and follow this through reasonably concisely. And I'm going to look at it in these ways. Number one, Zechariah's encounter.

So he meets an angel. Scary. Mary is meeting an angel. And then Zechariah's problem. And then Mary's encounter.

And Mary's problem, because she meets the same angel. I've done the angel big. I don't know what angels look like to draw them, but those things. Zechariah's encounter, Zechariah's problem.

Mary's encounter, Mary's problem. Before we do that, let me just introduce you to the writer of this narrative. He's Luke. He's a doctor.

[4:12] And he tells us right at the beginning the way he's done it. He says, Many have been undertaken to draw up an account of things that were fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who were from the first, eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus.

That's who he's writing it to. So that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. Now, nobody knows who Theophilus was. Perhaps he's sort of like every man or something like that.

It means friend of God, Theophilus. Or lover of God. And Luke says, I'm writing this, and I think it's worth noting what he says he's doing so that we know what we're listening to.

So he says there are things that have been fulfilled among us. And that's worth thinking about. His view is that things have been fulfilled.

[5:20] So that promises have been kept. Or things that were empty or relatively empty have been filled up. Perhaps things that had a certain degree of meaning have now been filled with all the meaning that they can carry.

Things have been fulfilled, he says. And that's what he says he's writing about, things that have been fulfilled. And he writes in the context of a dense connection of eyewitness testimony.

So he mustn't think he's making this up. He mustn't think he's sat down one evening. What should I write? Oh, I don't know. Yeah, I'll make up some stuff about Jesus. What he says is there's loads and loads of people telling this story.

It's being passed around hither and thither by people who are very careful about what they're saying. He calls them eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

So they're not masters of the word saying what they want. They're servants of the word saying what the word demands that they say. And he is saying, I want to bring this together in an orderly way.

[6:24] These things have been handed down to us, he says in verse 2. So in the same way you would hand over a baby to somebody, you wouldn't just chuck it, would you? You would hand very carefully the baby on to somebody else to hold.

These people have handed over a testimony which they've been very careful about. And Luke says, I have carefully investigated everything from the beginning.

So he's got these words and he's chosen them very carefully for us. And he says the result is in verse 4 that you may know the certainty of the things you've been taught. So he's aiming to convince people.

He's not saying, you know, make of this what you will. He's saying, I'm giving you careful words that I've got carefully and thought about carefully.

I've put them down carefully so that you can be certain. And I think if we're going to have any respect for this ancient author, we ought to listen with respect and attention. Please don't think we're newer, we're modern, we're cleverer than he is.

[7:23] Because we're not. He's done a really good job on putting this down. And we ought to listen to it. And if what he says brings us to certainty, we shouldn't resist that.

That's what he means it to do. So let's look at Zechariah's encounter. And we're told about Zechariah in this chapter, verse 5. He says, in the time of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Obijah.

His wife, Elizabeth, was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of the Lord, observing all the commandments and regulations blamelessly.

So they were upright, moral, observant people. They did what the law of Moses said they should do.

So they're sort of the epitome of what the Old Testament was meant to form in people.

[8:23] But, we're told, she was barren. Verse 7. They were both well on in years.

And we get told this a few times. And they're there, as Luke tells us, in Jerusalem in the place of sacrifice. Now, there's nothing wrong with being observant.

And there's nothing wrong with having no children. And there's nothing wrong with being old. And there's nothing wrong with being in Jerusalem. But, Luke is talking about fulfillment.

And God has something to fill up, to fill for the people in this story.

He's going to fulfill things. So, the righteousness of observance. There's going to be a fulfilling. A righteousness is going to come, which is beyond what the law of Moses could bring.

[9:35] A righteousness, says the Apostle Paul, who became a Christian later than this, obviously. He says, sir. A righteousness from God is revealed, to which the law and the prophets testify.

But it's bigger and better. And in place of the barrenness of dear Elizabeth, there's going to be a fulfilling of fruitfulness and new life.

A fruitfulness that comes from beyond the limitations of this world. That's what's going to happen.

The Apostle Paul tells us that Christian life has got the fruit in it, which is from the spirit.

Not from the limitations of the flesh. And there's going to be newness. A new covenant beyond the limitations of the old covenant, which we're told is obsolete and passing away.

And rather than being based in one geographical location in Jerusalem, what's going to happen is going to be international. Which is just as well, because we're not in Jerusalem, are we?

[10:43] This message, this working of God, reaches out to us even this morning. Well, what's this encounter that Zechariah has?

It's good news. The angel says to him, he's in the temple offering incense as he's supposed to do.

And in that confined and fairly dark space, this angel appears to him. And we're told in verse 12 that Zechariah was startled and gripped with fear.

And the angel says to him, don't be afraid. Now this angel we find is one of the top angels. Either one of the top or the top angel. Gabriel. Gabriel.

He says, God has sent me one of his top officials. I hesitate to try and think of any similar political.

[11:43] Anyway, let's not leave. Let's not go down there. So God sends a top angel. And he says, I've been brought here personally to bring you good news. He said that in verse 19.

I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. And I have been sent to speak to you and bring you this good news. And what's the good news? Well, it says in verse 13, your prayers have been heard.

Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear a son. And you are to give him the name John. So I've done a slightly pregnant version of Elizabeth there. And you are to give him the name John.

I looked up John, which is Johann. That's the German version of John, isn't it? Johann. Johannes. The yo bit, I think, is God.

And the han bit is grace. And it says something like, God is gracious. And we're told about this child. Verse 14. He will be a joy and delight to you.

[12:43] And many will rejoice because of his birth. So this isn't Jesus that's being foretold. This is John the Baptist. But he is part of the whole deal.

And he will be a joy. And many will rejoice. This is good, good news. And we're told about him in verse 15. That he will be filled from the Holy Spirit even from birth.

It's another characteristic of these stories. They're about joy. They're about the Holy Spirit. And here the Holy Spirit, I think very unusually, is said to be in this baby from, well, I think from conception actually.

But, anyway, from day one. And he's going to have a powerful ministry. A ministry of reform. Touching hearts across the generations.

Many of the people of Israel he will bring back to the Lord their God. He will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children. And the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous.

[13:46] Well, that's what he did. And, I mean, we get these people in history, don't we, who are at the center of huge movements across nations. There are not many such people. But there are some.

And John the Baptist, we're told, is going to be one of them. And, of course, historically that was exactly true. And we're specifically told he's to revive and restore the spiritual consciousness of the nation.

Ready for the Lord's coming. That's what it says. Ready to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Well, that's what the angel said. That's the encounter. And Zechariah has a problem. He might have the same problem. How can I know this? Verse 18. How can I be sure of this? What he literally says is, how can I know this?

Of course, you might be thinking the same thing. I'm listening to these words. How can I know they're true? How can I know this? And Zechariah gives reasons that this might not be the case. [14:47] He says, I'm an old man. And my wife is well on in years. That second time we're told that my wife is old. Please don't try, husbands, don't try telling people multiple times that your wife is old.

But this is, I am an old man and my wife is old. Now, Mary is going to ask a similar sort of question in the second set of things.

But we presume she has a different motivation because the responses are different for each of them. How can I know this? Well, you see, he has this problem, doesn't he?

Now, the funny thing is he prayed because he's told, your prayer has been heard. So he was in a strange situation of praying, but not actually believing that God was able to do what he asked.

And he was in a strange situation of receiving good news from an angel right in front of him. But he's too much influenced by the physical and visible and medical factors to believe that God could change anything.

[16:04] I know you're an angel. I know you've told me, but I'm old. My wife's old. So, are you sure? How can I be sure? And the angel says, your judgment is wrong.

You have enough. To form a conclusion. And for you to resist that conclusion is a wrong thing. It doesn't come from weighing the evidence. It comes from your own inner prejudices. And he is struck dumb for his refusal to believe the good news.

I think it's a little bit of a challenge for us. This story will turn out to be full of good news and joyful tidings and astounding innovations.

And the question is what we make of it. We've actually got some very good evidence here of a historian who's saying, I'm not making this up.

[17:05] I'm telling you sober truth and I've investigated it. And I wonder what goes on in our hearts by which we might say, well, I don't believe that. Nothing to do with me.

Nonsense. Irrelevant. What's the basis for saying that? The story invites the listener to believe it. And Zechariah should have believed it.

It's a story which goes on to include forgiveness for guilty people. It goes on to include the taking away of shame for shamed people.

It goes on to include the wiping of the slate clean for sinful people. It's good news to be believed. And it's good news of hope for people who are stuck in some sort of dead end as this couple perceive themselves to be.

This good news breaks through all of that. Let's look at Mary's encounter. Let's move on to what happened to Mary. Now, this is in a different place.

[18:11] This is, we presume, after, I think this is after Elizabeth is, she's now six months pregnant. I think that's what the six months refers to.

And God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, to a town in Galilee. So the angel Gabriel goes to Nazareth to Mary. And this unmarried woman, single woman, is called Mary.

Now, she's, there's a picture of Mary. She's, as we understand, she's pledged to be married, but she's not married. She's not yet married. She hasn't yet had her wedding day.

And the angel goes to her and says, greetings, you who are highly favoured, the Lord is with you. Let me just stop on the translation there. I think it's sometimes translated, Mary full of grace, as if this was something that Mary had inside herself.

That's not what it says. It says, hail Mary, you've been shown a lot of favour. You are much favoured. That's what it says. You are really, God has shown grace or favour to you in a big amount.

[19:22] That's what the greeting is. And she, well, it doesn't say she's fearful, but it says she is greatly troubled and wondered what kind of

greeting this might be.

I'm sure you would wonder what sort of greeting that was. Somebody turned up on your doorstep and said, what bounty is yours? And you would say, ah, you're the Nigerian who emailed me, aren't you, about your uncle's millions of dollars.

You would be suspicious. And she's troubled. It says she's very troubled. What's going on here? But the angel said, do not be afraid, Mary.

You have found favour with God. You will be with child. It's a rather sweet expression which says you'll be sort of taken in the womb. Something will happen in your womb.

And you will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus. So here's the second sort of miracle child, the birth announced. And now we get a list of things to do with this child.

[20:28] So his name. He will be given the name Jesus. Which in my understanding is equivalent to the Hebrew name Joshua. Which is something like God saves.

All the names are significant. And we were told he will be great. We were told John the Baptist would be great. And here is another person who is great.

You might like to ponder the greatness of this man. As I said in history there are a limited number. A handful of people who have changed everything.

Apostle Paul was one such person. I suppose you might say Karl Marx was one such person. But Jesus is definitely one such person. He's changed the course of history.

With a very limited palette of things that he could use. He's changed the course of history. His name will be great. He will be great.

[21:28] How great? Yes, that's the question isn't it? How great? What does his greatness consist of? Christians would say his greatness is the greatest possible greatness.

Because he's not just a man. He's not just a rabbi. He's not just a miracle worker. He's not just a philosopher. He is God himself.

Come down to earth. He will be called the son of the most high. Now that could mean minimal. It could mean that he's the king. Because the king was the son in some sense.

But does it mean much more than this? Is the angel saying actually this sonship is much more than simply an official title? He will take the throne of his father David.

As we've seen his genetic line is definitely Davidic. And he will have a kingdom. I've lost my place. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

[22:25] His kingdom will never end. A kingdom that never ends. A forever kingdom. A kingdom that lasts longer than the Roman Empire.

A kingdom that lasts longer than the Babylonian Empire. That lasts longer than Western civilization will last. Quite possibly. A kingdom that never ends.

And he will reign over his people forever. So these are stupendous things to be said about a baby. And of course the reader is invited to inform their judgment as to how much fulfillment there is going on here.

The one who will be the fulfillment of all the multiple promises of the God of the Bible. The God who through this person will change the history of the world. Will change not only one nation.

But touch all different nations and tribes and tongues and languages with redemption. Now Mary has a problem.

[23:29] Well she has a problem. Like Zechariah had a problem. Verse 34. How will this be since I am a virgin? Or in the, if you want to take it literally, I know not a man.

The knowing being in the biblical sense. Because it's in the Bible isn't it? In other words, I haven't had sex with a man. So how can I have a baby? And the answer being, I think you could put it in two ways.

Number one is God's power. And number two is the nature of this baby. What about God's power? Verse 35.

The angel said, the Holy Spirit will come upon you. And the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So there's something again here about the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit will come upon you. And overshadow you. So I think that idea of overshadowing is rather a tender one, isn't it? There will be an overshadowing of God's power on this young woman.

[24:32] And through this overshadowing, her womb will begin the life of this baby. There's something quite, seems to me, tender and willing rather than forced and brutal.

You know, we live in an age in which sex includes sort of brutality and impersonality and objectivisation and all this sort of thing.

And this seems to me to be the very opposite of that, very tender and personal and tender and willing.

And so, something that seemed impossible will happen. For nothing is impossible with God. I don't know whether you agree with that statement.

Nothing is impossible with God. I'd be interested to, what, why would you disagree with it? Because he doesn't lie.

[25:31] Well, he doesn't lie, does he? He doesn't lie. Nothing is impossible with God. It's almost a statement of what divinity is, isn't it? The one who made everything, who can do anything he chooses and wishes to do.

And the one who has made us. Nothing is impossible with God. And we presume that, well, Mary's response to this is a positive one.

Okay. It seems difficult. Well, it seems impossible. But if God has said this is what is happening, his power is sufficient for this.

And the second thing is the nature of the baby. So, there seems to be a link between the nature of the conception and the identity of the person conceived.

The power of the Spirit will come upon you, so the Holy One born will be called the Son of God. Not, in one way, a human baby.

[26:32] The baby will be born in the ordinary way. But part of his identity, as it would seem to be from here, is from God.

Not human through and through, in that sense that there's nothing more than humanity. Truly human, but truly also the Son of God.

And you've got to say that he must be meaning more than just an official title. There's something about the being of this child. If we want to use the long word, ontological.

Meaning the being of the child. Rather than simply his official status. And this is what we're told at the outset. And as the story moves on, well, we have yet to see the full depiction of the creator God in the person of Jesus Christ.

But he's the one who's going to go on to multiply bread and fish to feed 5,000. He's the one who's going to go on to turn water into wine.

[27:33] As only the creator can do. He's the one who's going to go on to walk on water. He's the one who's going to go on to rise from the dead. So what's her response?

She had this problem. And her response to it is, well, it's there in verse 38. I am the Lord's servant, Mary said.

May it be to me as you have said. And the angel left her. So this response is believing. It's a response of faith.

And the faith, now you see, nowadays we talk about faith communities, meaning religious people without any particular distinction. But there is something specific about this sort of faith.

It's not just faith in anything. It is faith in what God says. It's believing what God through the angel has said. It's faith in specific words.

[28:30] Not just believing any religious thing, but specific revealed things. You know, you can find loads of rubbish to believe if you want to on YouTube and Facebook. You can believe on almost anything.

They'll tell you almost anything. And I distinguish between superstition, which is faith in nonsense, from biblical faith, which is faith in what God has said.

Second response is believing that God can do what for humans is impossible. I don't think there's any intrinsic reason why we shouldn't believe that, is there?

Isn't that sort of just the way it is? That God can do what for human beings is impossible? And yet the human mind sort of says, oh no, God can't do that. I'm not quite sure where that comes from.

Well, one suggestion is, of course, our Western society has lived through the period called the Enlightenment, the philosophical movement, which strongly asserted that reality is limited to what humans can measure and understand and rationalise.

[29:39] That's what the Enlightenment said. And we've got that in our brains, haven't we? That those are the only things that are real. But the Bible says, well, that's a very limited and prejudiced view.

There's more, what does it say, more things in heaven and earth than are contained in your philosophy. Somebody finishes that. Horatio, does it say that at the end of it? I don't know. We shouldn't have closed minds about this.

God can do what for human beings is impossible. Zechariah had this problem. How can this be? And the answer is, God's power is able. And the third thing about this response to Mary's problem was a focus on a person.

A focus, not on a philosophical principle, but on a particular person. This baby.

This one who will be great and be the son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house forever.

[30:49] His kingdom will never end. Not the observances that Zechariah and Elizabeth were so good at. Not the human limitations that Mary was so conscious of.

But, as Luke says, a filling, a fulfilling through Jesus Christ. So what's different about Christianity? What's the key to it?

It's according to the words of God in the Bible, received by faith. It's to do with the power of the Holy Spirit bringing supernatural new life, which is to be believed and experienced.

It's the announcement of a joy and a hope that comes from beyond this world and outside it.

Something to be persuaded of and for us to set our hopes on. And, in particular, this is focused upon a person.

Jesus Christ. The Saviour himself. Whom we're to know and trust and love. Thank you for your attention.