

Carols by candlelight

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[0:00] On what the angels said about it being a time of great joy. It's quite emphatic that it says this is good news of great joy that will be to all the people. I wanted to pick up on that thought.

Good news of great joy. I couldn't help putting it into the context that we're in. We've had a recent general election and our country has been in quite a degree of disarray.

And depending on your politics, I know the politics of some of you here. I don't know the politics of all of you here. So some people will be in absolute joy and some people will be in total despair. Thinking that all is won or all is lost.

And what I'd like to say is actually the Christmas message does have a bearing on this. And it makes both of those reactions mistaken. It says that it's not an occasion for absolute joy. Nor is it an occasion for total despair. And I want to try and prove that to you or demonstrate that to you or argue that with you this morning. This morning. This evening.

[1:05] Now in case you're thinking, oh well that means that we should not care. I don't think that's saying at all that we shouldn't care. Jesus' summary of the Torah, of the law of Moses.

He summarized it like this. You should love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. So just taking that last bit. It matters to the Almighty that we care about people. That we care about the people around us. We care about our fellow citizens.

That we care about all these things. It also says that we're to love God. If we don't care about people around us and society then we have failed utterly.

So I'm not trying to say we shouldn't care. We should care politically and actively and financially. So we should care and we should be involved with things like that. But what I'm saying is that absolute joy and total despair are both mistaken.

[2:07] And I'm going to give three Christmas reasons. Preachers like to use alliteration. So I'm going to have a go at that. Power. Beginning with P. Plan. Which also begins with P.

And person. Which also begins with P. So three P's. Power. Plan. And person. First of all, power. From the point of view of power.

Including political power and military power. The text said. God says. To us a child is born. And the government should be on his shoulders.

That's a statement about the power of the king who was prophesied. And you could enlarge on that statement and say. It's a statement that God personally rules over all things.

And that there's a special focus through the kingship of his son Jesus. The Lord's Prayer. You might remember. I don't know whether you remember this. You might remember it from memory.

[3:12] Thine is the kingdom. The power. And the glory. It's a statement. Whose is the power? God's is the power. Thine is the kingdom. The power. And the glory. And this is saying that in fact.

No king. No king. No president. No prime minister. No emperor. Has final control. And ultimate power. But God does.

And I think that is a message. To give us hope. To give us confidence. confidence. Now you might be objecting to that. And you say. Well I don't know.

Is that at all believable? Is that at all believable? And bad things happen. And you might have in your mind. Some very bad things that have happened. And you find that difficult to reconcile with the idea.

That God is in charge of everything. And I can't unwrap all of that. It's a deep thing. And I don't think we're capable of penetrating into that mystery. But what I can say.

[4:09] Is that Jesus believed it. And as an example. Or particular instance of this. At the time of his trial. When Jesus.

Who by any account was an innocent man. An upright man. An honest man. Was put on trial. For his life. And he stood in front of the Roman governor.

The Roman governor being the representative. Of the most powerful empire. That there was at that time. And he could say to this man. You would not have any power.

Unless it was given to you. From above. That's what Jesus could say. Facing. Being on trial for his life.

Facing the Roman governor. He says the only power you have. Is what you're allowed to have. From somebody else. From above. And if it's good enough for Jesus. That's good enough for me.

[5:08] I mean. Give you another example. The circumstances of Jesus' birth. You might. Not have quite worked this out. But. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Why was he born in Bethlehem. Because.

The Roman emperor. Said. I want to. Put it. I want to tax everybody. I want to know where they live. They've all got to go home. They've all got to register. And that's why. Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

He was sent there. By the Roman authorities. He was born at Bethlehem. Now that was what God had prophesied. That the Savior would be born in Bethlehem. And.

The way God worked that. Was through. A distant. Proud. Uncaring. Roman emperor. Who wanted to get more tax.

And God said. That's what you think you're doing. I'm using that. For my purposes. Because this will very neatly. Arrange. That the Savior.

[6:04] Who I promised I would be born at Bethlehem. Will in fact be born in Bethlehem. Even in the bitterest circumstances. God is still in charge.

Working out. His plan. And purpose. And I think. This is a Christmas message. And it is a message to give us. Hope. And confidence. And I want to say.

Please don't lose. Faith. In the power of God. Please don't be. Thinking. That human beings have the power.

To bring us into absolute joy. Nor be in total despair. If you think things aren't going the right way. God is in charge. Another objection.

Do you know. You might be saying. I can't accept. That he has the power. Or indeed the right. To be in charge of everything. Let me give you a comment on that.

[6:59] I think in a way. This is the human problem. The human failure. The failure to acknowledge. That God's power. And authority. Over us.

Is right. The refusal of that. Is really. What the Bible would say. Is the essence of sin. Goes back to when. Adam was told.

You shouldn't eat that fruit. And he says. God doesn't have the power. To tell me that. He doesn't have the right. To tell me that. I make up my own mind. Of course. That's where sin entered. It's quite a subtle thing.

Isn't it? But. Our. Rejection. Of God's right. To rule. Is. Our problem. We want to know the root problem in the world.

It is this. Our instinctive declaration. That we are God's. Our lives are within our power. We are our own personal saviors. And God is not allowed to be God.

[7:53] God. Well that was. Power. Second thing. Plan. Is there. A plan. It would be so comforting to know.

That. There is a plan. And it would be even more comforting to know. The plan was for our good. I suppose we could look out. And we could see.

Well. Events seem to be meaningless. Random. Cruel. And certainly our politics. In the past. Months and years. Has seen chaotic.

Inharmonious. Rancorous. Sometimes deceptive. And divisive. If we were to look at that. We would say. Well where is the plan. In all that. But the Bible says. There is a plan.

And it is a good plan. And it is a redemptive plan. And it is God's plan. Motivated. By favor. To our species. The angels said.

[8:54] A savior has been born. To you. Get that word. A savior. Not. An analyst. Or an economist. Or a.

A. A. A judge. But a savior. A savior has been born. To you. And the. The angels say. This is. This is him. This is Christ.

The Lord. And they also say. On earth. Peace. To men. On whom. His favor rests. That is the translation. I have got here. On whom.

His favor rests. That is enormously good news. Isn't it? That God looks on our species. On our race. He says. I have a plan. To favor these people.

To do them good. To benefit them. Now. We might not be that good. At receiving it. But he says. That is what the plan is. The redemptive plan.

[9:47] I will say a few things. About the redemptive plan. First. These begin with L. It is left handed. In the Bible. God has a right hand.

And he does powerful things. With his right hand. But sometimes. God thinks. Things done with his left hand. And they are more. Sort of like. We would say. Left field. And of course. The birth of Jesus.

Is exactly like this. It doesn't involve. An emperor. But a baby. And he doesn't bring in. Chief executive officers.

From the top. FTSE. 100 companies. He brings in. Shepherds. Who were. Sitting out in the fields. Looking after their sheep. And the key players.

In the story. And if you were here this morning. We did a little bit of the background. To the story. They are not. The. Big folk. On the national stage. But we looked this morning.

[10:42] An elderly couple. In Jerusalem. A young country girl. From up north. In. In Galilee. These are the people. That God uses. In his sort of. Rather. Left handed plan.

This doesn't begin with L. Does it? It's weak. It's a plan. That uses weakness. Not achieving objectives. By aggression. And disinformation. And cruelty.

But. By. By. By. Self-sacrifice. By. Apparent weakness. And. The Christian claim. Is that God. Most. Shows. His. Power. And his. Plan. By. Jesus. Dying. On the cross. In what looks like. Total disgrace.

Total weakness. And the Bible says. That is. That is. Where God's. Power. Is most. Displayed. That is. Where he has. Achieved. The most. Astonishing.

[11:37] Victory. The most. Huge. Defeat. Of. Sin. And Satan. And the most. Astonishing. Victory. For his. Purposes. The death.

Upon the cross. Of Jesus. As an atoning. Substitute. He's called. A lamb. We have. Lambs. In nativity. Plays. Don't we? Because a lamb.

Is a sacrificial animal. And. It is. A long-term. Plan. So there's an L. The plan of God. Outlasts. The Egyptian Empire.

Because to find out about the Egyptian Empire. You have to go to a museum. Outlasts the Assyrian Empire. Probably never even heard of the Assyrian Empire. You go to a museum and find out about them. Outlasts the Babylonian Empire.

The Greek Empire. The Roman Empire. And may even. We don't know what the future holds. Outlasts Western democracy. But God's kingdom. Is a long-term plan.

[12:32] And it works. Through the centuries. And down through the ages. And the. The aim of this long-term plan. Is not just to make. Life better for citizens.

In this sort of world. But a new heaven. And a new earth. Where all wrongs. Will be righted. And everything. Will be made new. And you might say. Well that's pie in the sky.

It hasn't happened yet. But. We have seen. The first evidence of it. You might say. The green shoots of this. In the resurrection of Jesus. From the dead.

When he rose from the dead. A new order. Entered this world. Something new. Was beginning. The old. Way was. Cracks were coming into it.

And something new. Was bursting in. Which is. His long-term plan. And. You know this. If we see the long-term view. And the things that have happened.

[13:28] In the general election. Well. It puts gains and losses. Into perspective. I think if we could receive.

That thought. We would all go home. With a lighter step. This evening. And thirdly. Person. There's power.

There's a plan. And there's a person. And I ask. Who is the key person. In all this. Who is the key person. As far as God is concerned.

Well. Names come to mind. Don't they. I can hardly avoid. Saying. Names like. Donald Trump. Boris Johnson. Jeremy Corbyn. Key people. Oh.

God says actually. Yes. Okay. They're important. But there is somebody. Who is actually. The key person. Somebody. Before whose power. And nobility. All others.

[14:21] Fade. Into relative obscurity. And that person. Is the baby. Jesus of Nazareth. Born in Bethlehem. Let me give you a quote.

From. An emperor. Napoleon. Somebody who knew something. About power. And conquest. This is not in French. But.

This is a quote. From what he said. Everything. In Christ. Astonishes me. His spirit. Overawes me. His will.

Confounds me. Between him. And whom. Ever else. In the world. There is no possible. Term of comparison. The nearer. I approach. The more carefully.

I examine. Everything. Is above me. Everything. Remains grand. Of a grandeur. That overpowers. And there is Napoleon.

[15:18] Saying what he thought about. Jesus Christ. The person. It is good news. Of great joy. And we thought about. The power. It is over and above.

Political power. God's power. Works quietly. And mysteriously. And it works. Unstoppably. For a long term goal. His plan.

Is to do people good. It is a sort of. Left handed plan. It works by. Weakness. And sacrifice. It is a long term plan. For a new heaven. And a new earth.

And it is confirmed. By the resurrection. Of Jesus. And. There is a person. At the centre of this. And that is who we have been. Singing about. The centre of God's purposes. Is one.

God. Man. The man. Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus. And he calls us. To rest. Our lives. On his power.

[16:15] And to align. Our lives. With his plan. And to make. His person. The centre. Of our lives.

And here is the way. Not to be alarmed. Not to be deceived. But to be confident. To have joy. Here is the way. To find deeper. And lasting joy.

In him. This Christmas. And may God bless you all. As you're here. This evening. We've got one more song. To sing. And it's this one. Hark the herald angels sing. I hope you've enjoyed the evening.

