

Peace on the Earth

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[0 : 00] I can't believe that Christmas is already upon us. It seems only yesterday that the Christmas cards came down and the cards and the trees that we had were neatly stowed away in our recycling bins.

Some of us, myself included, have to confess that we've been looking forward to this Christmas ever since last Christmas. Dare we use the word humbug in our gatherings anymore since it seems to be tarnished after Boris Johnson's recent indiscretions.

So we're soon going to be singing, if not already, endless jingles. I wish it could be Christmas every day. Well, the good news of the gospel is that for the Christian, it can be Christmas every day. Christmas isn't one festival one day packed away the next day, as much as it is a year-long enjoyment of what the coming of Jesus Christ means for us as Christians.

A little over 2,000 years ago, a multitude of glorious angels appeared to a group of lowly shepherds and announced to them the birth of Jesus Christ.

[1 : 21] These angels were so filled with amazement that they couldn't keep themselves from singing praises to God. In Luke chapter 2, verse 14, we hear their chorus, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

You'll notice from this verse here that God does not promise peace on the earth, here and now. But through the angels, he does promise peace to the earth.

The peace he announces is a peace we can enjoy every day if we will but listen to his word, put our faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, and follow him as his disciples.

So if we try and tune in to the frequency of the angels this Advent season, we'll continue to hear their joyful song in our ears and our hearts, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those upon whom his favor rests.

More than that, we'll join in with the singing, and we'll begin to experience the peace the coming of Christ can bring for ourselves.

[2 : 42] Seems to me that the angels song here in Luke 2.14 can be understood in three ways. First of all, as a declaration of grace. Second, as a proclamation of harmony.

And third, as an invitation to salvation. In the first instance in verse 14, it's a declaration of grace. Declaration of grace.

There are many themes which run throughout the whole Bible. They range from subjects as sublime as the love of God, down to subjects a bit more mundane.

How to live wisely in this world. There are light subjects, and there are dark subjects. The darkest of them all is the issue of human sin. Human sin rears its ugly head.

In Genesis 3, right at the beginning of the Bible, when Adam and Eve disobey God and eat from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And we say, well, no big deal.

[3 : 47] They made a mistake. They ate something they shouldn't have eaten. No big deal. No big deal. But there was so much more to the darkness of their sin than a mere error of judgment.

They knew what they were doing. And they consciously rebelled against God. Over the centuries, successive Christian scholars have described the first sin in the garden as deicide.

Deicide. Suicide is the killing of oneself. Homicide is the killing of another human being. Pesticide is used to kill pests. Deicide is the killing of God.

To commit sin is to shake one's fist at God and say to him, I don't need you. I don't want you. In fact, I wish you were dead so that I can get on with what I want to do.

Sin is not an error in judgment. It's not a small thing. It is a conscious act of rebellion against the king of the universe. And more serious still, it is the deliberate rejection of a father's love.

[5 : 01] Well, the story of sin proceeds at pace. Genesis 4 records the first homicide where Cain kills his brother Abel.

It goes on and on and gets much worse. The history of the Old Testament is the history of human sin. As successive generations rebel against God and reject his loving fatherhood.

There are notable exceptions. But even these exceptions have lives which are at best a strange mixture of godliness and ungodliness. The chorus of the story of human sin reaches its crescendo with the words of Psalm 14.

The Lord looks down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there are any who understand. Any who seek God. All have turned aside.

They have together become corrupt. There is no one who does good. Not even one. The psalmist goes on in Psalm 2 where we read, The kings of the earth take their stand against, and the rulers gather together against the Lord and his anointed one.

[6 : 15] The individual stories of the Old Testament all contain the theme of human sin as rebellion against God.

Whether it's Noah and the flood, Moses and the Exodus, or David and Saul, human sin is writ large. It's the one issue we most want to avoid, but cannot.

It is the one word which has been redefined and banned in our woke culture, but without which the Christian faith has no meaning at all.

King David was one of these strange mixtures of a man. He's called the man of God, and in some places he shows himself as such, but in other places he shows himself as a liar and a murderer and an adulterer.

In Psalm 51, in his Song of Confession, David writes, I know my own transgressions. My sin is always before me. And then he says the most remarkable thing.

[7 : 21] He says, Against you, O Lord, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. You see, David knew that ultimately sin is against the person of God.

It's rebellion not so much against a set of standards or a system, but against the person of God. So since our creation virtually, mankind has been rebelling against God, sinning against God, rejecting the loving invitation of a father.

But now in Luke chapter 2, verse 14, in a stunning display of mercy and grace, God announces through the angels' chorus, peace to men on whom God's favor rests.

The God against whom we've always sinned, the God we'd rather be dead, and whose loving invitations we as a human race have rejected since the very beginning of our existence, He declares His grace.

He does not hide from us. He does not destroy us, both of which we deserve. He declares to us, rather, His grace, and announces peace to the earth.

[8 : 44] The child born in Bethlehem will be the means by which our sin and offense will be taken away, and peace is restored between us and God. The dark history of human sin will be replaced by the coming of the one who will later be called our peace.

So you see, the story of Christmas is, in the last analysis, ultimately the story of God's love overwhelming our hatred for Him, and His grace toward us overcoming our sin against Him.

This isn't a story for Christmas alone. This is a daily reality for all those who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. That's how, for the Christian, it really can be Christmas every day.

Because the coming of Jesus Christ is the declaration of God's grace. Second, peace to those on whom His favor rests is a proclamation of harmony.

It's a proclamation of harmony. You may or may not be familiar with the words the Bible uses for peace. In the Old Testament, the word is shalom.

[10 : 04] We still hear shades of that word today with the Arabic greeting salam. In the New Testament, the word is ireni. We talk about someone having an irenic tone, someone who wants to make peace with their words, just as the female name irene means the peaceful one.

And the word itself is interesting. It's derived from a Greek word which means to join, to join together. To be at peace with someone is to be joined with them.

The word we might use is the word harmony. One of the benefits of being able to have time to play with words like peace and discovering it's taken from a word which means to join is that it opens up multiple avenues of thought.

The most powerful of those is when we consider exactly what was joined at Christmas. What was joined in such a way that harmony can be proclaimed by the angels?

Luke himself does not give the answer, but his fellow gospel writer, John, does. When in chapter 1, verse 14 of John's gospel, we write, the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

[11:22] We have seen his glory, the glory as one, as the one and only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. At Christmas, the Christian celebrates the joining of these two things, the word and the flesh.

The flesh is who we are, the human nature. The word is who God is, the divine nature, in particular God the Son. In that child born in Bethlehem is the coming together of these two natures, the human and the divine.

It is the greatest of all mysteries how it can be that in the person of Jesus Christ, there are two natures, unfused, undistinct, and yet there is one person.

But the truth is that in this baby Christ Jesus, whose birth we celebrate at Advent, the divine and the human are joined together.

He is Emmanuel, which means God with us. And again I say, this is the most profound of all mysteries, how it can be that in that one baby lying in the manger, there can be two natures, divine and human.

[12:46] And it's mysterious not just in its operation, but also in its wonder. How can the God who fills the universe with his glory contract himself into the frame of a child?

And how can the flesh of man, which is so polluted by sin, be joined in union with the holiness of God? There are really so many mysteries attached to the message of Advent, and yet in the proclamation of the angels here in Luke 2.14, we hear that message loud and clear.

God and man are joined in the person of that child born in Bethlehem. Many years ago, the American singer Joan Osborne asked the question, what if God was one of us?

Well, she didn't need to ask the question, because God in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, is already one of us. He has joined himself to us, and his name is Jesus Christ.

And this really is the most amazing of truths for us all. The good news for many people at Christmas time is that Asda have reduced the price of their turkeys by ten pence a pound, or kilogram.

[14:06] Or that Doctor Who is making a comeback on Christmas Day, and as far as Walter's concerned, it's a man who's Doctor Who from now on. The best news of all is that God has joined himself with us, and his name is Christ Jesus.

Christmas is a time of wide emotions for us all. There's joy, but there's also grief. There's pleasure, but there's also pain. There's company, but there's also loneliness, especially among the elderly.

There is an epidemic of loneliness. There'll be no one joining them for Christmas lunch. No presents under the Christmas tree. They can't get to church to hear the Christmas carols.

For many elderly people, Christmas Day will be a day like all the rest, lonely. And we might wonder to ourselves, what does the proclamation of the angels in Luke 2.14 do that have to offer them?

Well, simply this. The God of heaven and earth understands their loneliness because in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, he has experienced it for himself.

[15:16] He knows the gut-wrenching pain of being abandoned and being rejected by everyone, yes, by even his closest friends. Here's the good news we celebrate at Advent.

The peace the angels proclaimed to the shepherds that in the person of Jesus Christ, the word has become flesh and made his dwelling among us.

There is nothing you can experience in this present age of which God has no knowledge or no fellow feeling.

You know, this amazing truth which some theologians call the hypostatic union, when fully understood, passes from the realm of intellectual theology into that of experience.

God shares my flesh and my flesh shares in him the joys and the sorrows, the pleasures and the pain, did I say it, even the fear and the loneliness.

[16:26] If we can say that Christ died for us, then surely we can also say he was born for us and born for this reason that he might share in all our experiences.

And that's not just true on Christmas Day, but for the Christian every day. That God's with me both in my tears of joy and sorrow. That God understands the furrows of my fear and he understands the energy of my excitement.

So you see, Christmas is ultimately the story of God's supreme power for the human race overcoming all natural boundaries in joining the unjoinable. Divinity and humanity. And Christmas is ultimately the story of God's supreme passion for the human race in the proclamation of harmony, this declaration of peace. God assures us that he forever remains with us. Though we may sometimes feel it, we are never, ever alone.

[17 : 39] There's no need for Joan Osborne to sing her songs anymore. It's a proclamation of harmony. And then lastly and briefly, this announcement in Luke 2.14 is an invitation to salvation.

It's an invitation to salvation. Peace to those on whom his favor rests. I've already alluded to it, but the greatest problem dealt with by the coming of Jesus Christ is the rebellion of mankind against God.

mankind has sinned against God and in doing so has declared war on God. It's not quite as simple as that, but this is how we are to understand the situation prior to the coming of Jesus.

Mankind's unceasing hatred of God. The fists of mankind shaking upwards in a heavenly direction. It's in the face of that opposition God makes his declaration of grace.

On earth peace to men on whom his favor rests. But these aren't mere words. There's far more to the declaration of God's grace than a set of vowels and consonants on a page.

[18 : 58] Rather, this declaration of God's grace is a description of all this child has come to do and to achieve. It's a statement of the mission of the Christ.

He's come to make peace where once there was only war. He's come to bring peace where once there was only rebellion. No child, no peace between God and man.

No child, only war between heaven and earth. What then is both the cause and the symptom of this war we have started against God and the rebellion we wage against him.

Again, it's our sin. Human sin is the offense which this child has been born to deal with. Jesus Christ, the divine and the human joined as one has come to bring peace between God and mankind by dealing with the problem of our sin.

The coming of Jesus Christ born in a stable laid in a manger is God's loving, wise and powerful solution to the problem of human sin.

[20 : 13] Because this child, this child, today wrapped in swaddling clothes, will one day be wrapped in grave clothes.

The child crying in his mother's arms today will tomorrow cry in pain on the cross. The child has been born one of us and as one of us he will die in our place as the sacrifice for our sin to bear the punishment we deserved.

This special child has been born to live a special life and to die a very special death. The death of a peacemaker who in his suffering body makes peace between an angry though loving God and an angry and unrepentant humanity.

Of course at Christmas time the last thing we want to be thinking about is death. For some of us this is an unfortunate reality because it brings back painful memories of loss. But in general none of us want our thoughts darkened by the thought of mortality and yet when we stare at that Christmas tree with all its lights and all its decorations let's cast our minds back to another tree.

A tree with no lights and no tinsel and no decorations. A tree on which the child whose birth we celebrate at Christmas was crucified and gave his life and gave his life for us.

[21 : 47] No we don't want to be thinking about death but if we really want to get the most out of Christmas we need to be thinking about the death of Jesus not just his birth because it's in the combination of the two.

He's made peace with God for the sins we committed and the rebellion we fomented against him. This is the message of salvation. Christ himself is our peace that in his body he has made peace between us and God.

And that objective peace he's made for us with God can translate into an inward peace we now experience as God becomes our father not our foe.

Inward peace of conscience. Inward peace from despair. Inward peace from the darkness of fear. Inward peace from the fear of circumstance.

But the most important of all those aspects of peace is the objective peace which Christ has made with God on account of our sin and guilt.

[22 : 55] It's a peace which for the Christian isn't confined to the 25th of December. But to the first of January. The second of January and all the way through to the 31st of December.

That peace which like a river rolls over our souls. And through Christ it's ours every day. That's the great news the Christian church has to offer this Christmas.

This declaration of grace. This proclamation of harmony. This invitation to salvation. But as I close I want to very briefly fixate on these on those last words.

namely that the announcement of the angels of peace to the shepherds is our invitation to salvation. Do you want to experience real peace this Christmas?

Not just on Christmas Day but every day. Do you want to know the peace of knowing that your sins are forgiven? God's your father not your foe.

[24 : 01] He's the friend who sticks closer than any brother. That peace which is the breathable air of heaven being drawn into the lungs of your heart today. Surely that's what we all want, right?

Let's all heed in this one word invitation. These angels are some of the Bible's first evangelists inviting their listeners into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

That if they shall accept for themselves God's way of salvation through the birth and the death of Christ, if they shall put their faith and trust in him, that peace shall be their peace.

It's that peace which can't be bought with money. Contra Ecclesiastes. It can only be received by faith. The simple act of placing our trust in Jesus Christ as our peacemaker with God.

God. Now I can't believe another Christmas season is upon us. It seems only yesterday we took last year's Christmas tree down and soon we'll be putting this year's Christmas tree up.

[25 : 07] However, what's not changed from last year to this year is this. God is still lovingly inviting ordinary men and women like us to put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ for salvation and then experience the peace which only Jesus can bring us.

And so having heard this message, perhaps some of us have heard it a million times before, will we finally accept as true the words of the great Scottish hymn written by Horatius Boner, brother of Andrew?

Not what these hands have done can save this guilty soul. Thy power alone, O Son of God, can make my being whole.

Peace with God isn't so much within your grasp, as much as it's being offered to you on a plate today, right here, right now, placing your faith in the Jesus whose birth the angels were announcing. Will you close your fist and reject the open invitation? or will you open your palm and accept it? for a long heart does you and has been ■■■■ the an the the world