

Carol service with nativity

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Preacher: Benji Cook

[0 : 00] Dear Lord, thank you so much for that first Christmas. Thank you that you came to the world to save us. Please show us more of your son this morning. Amen. Well, I wonder what it was that you missed the most last Christmas.

For those of us who were in kind of Christmas lockdown, it was thoroughly depressing. The big family meal for many of us, gone. The big turkey, gone. The tinsel, I thought wonderfully, gone. Sitting around the fire altogether opening presents, gone.

There was much we missed last Christmas. But the thing that we miss most, or at least for me, and I wonder if it's the same for you, was time with loved ones.

When Christmas is stripped back, we see really that it's a time of love. Now, I've brought something very precious to me up here today. You can't see it, but this is a picture of my wife and I at Christmas time.

It sits in my office all the time, and it's not particularly expensive or particularly precious from a monetary point of view. But it's important and precious to me because it's my favourite person.

[1 : 12] I love her, and that's why I have her and a picture of her on my desk. And the one thing I want us to grasp this Christmas and from this talk, if all else is stripped away, if everything else is stripped back, Christmas is a time of love.

And specifically, that God loves you. God loves you. And the verse that we have chosen for today is John 3, 16.

And you may be wondering why we chose this verse for our attention today. Well, we've been hearing in our previous readings the events of that first Christmas. And now, with this verse, we see the significance of that first Christmas.

Allow me to read it for us. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

This verse is from the lips of Jesus himself as to why he came. Now, many people think that Jesus was a whole host of things. A good teacher, dying for the sake of his teachings, kind of ahead of his time.

[2 : 21] Some think that he was a revolutionary. And some, and maybe some of you here today, think that he was a madman who's been misrepresented by history. But, here we have from Jesus, the reason as to why he came at that first Christmas.

And it was to show the love of God to the whole world. Jesus loves you. God loves you. And here, in Jesus' own words, we see how and why he loves you.

Now, from this little verse, we're not going anywhere else. So, this is our only reading for today.

We're going to see three things. The focus of God's love. The cost of God's love. And the goal of God's love.

And in those first six little words, for God so loved the world, we have that outrageous term. Though we are not very lovable, God loves the world.

God loves you. Whoever you are, whatever you have done, God loves you. Now, you might be thinking, well, that's not really a surprise, Benji.

[3 : 29] I'm quite lovable. And God himself, you know, he's fuzzy and warm and my little pony and he's love. And we might assume that, of course, God loves us. That's the whole point, isn't it, you Christians?

You're all about love. But I think that misses the reality of this verse. And I think it misses the reality of that little word, world.

Because, you see, world is a technical term in John's Gospel. And it means this world order where all of us resist and reject God's good rule over our lives.

In other words, God loves the world, even though the world is not very lovable. The world is not very lovable at all, in fact.

We are not very lovable. And actually, if you think about it, even over the last kind of year or so in the news, it doesn't take very long, does it, to realize that the world is not very lovable.

[4 : 31] The hypocrisy of leaders putting the country in lockdown to only then ignore the rules themselves. A nation left to rot as the Taliban take control once again and brutally suppress anyone who would mention women's rights.

A world of Sarah Everard, Me Too and Jimmy Savile. A world where pornography fuels sex trafficking. And yet our society tells us it's healthy. No, it doesn't take very long to realize the world is not very lovable.

But as I was thinking about this and preparing it, I realized that it isn't just in our social media feeds that we see the world is not very lovable. Because I came to consider my own life, my own attitudes and actions.

How I have treated those I love this year, or even this week. But more appallingly, how I've treated the God who knows me, loves me, made me, and gave his son for me.

And if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian here this morning, it's wonderful you're here. But you are in a similar position. You are currently living in rebellion of that same God.

[5 : 47] The God who gave his son for you. The God who made you. The God who loves you. And I wanted to do a thought experiment now. You know, if God exists, if he does, how do you think he feels about you living in his world under his love in complete rejection of him?

No, when I look at my own heart, and when I look at the world, we are not very lovable. The world is not very lovable. And so when we come to this verse, the outrageous reality is those first six little words.

The world is not lovable. Yet God so loved the world. God loves you. Despite how very unlovable you and I are.

You see, as I said, while society often pictures God as a warm, borderline, senile old man with a beard on a cloud who loves us in a fuzzy, my little pony way, I think that seriously misses the point. No, this world is not very lovable. And yet, God loves us. And that brings me on to my second point, the proof of God's love, his only son.

[7 : 03] The proof of God's love, his only son. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son. And these verses can only be talking about the death of Jesus on the cross.

And it's significant, I think, that this verse comes at the start of John's eyewitness account. We see right from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he intended to die for you.

And at the end of this account of John, we see that he did die for you. On the cross, Jesus died for you. And that truth, I think, answers so many of the questions that our society longs for, longs for an answer for.

How do I know I am loved? How do I know I have value, meaning, purpose? How do I know God loves me? Because Jesus died for you.

Jesus died for me. The unmistakable fact that this verse makes perfectly clear is that Jesus came into the world with one and only one purpose.

[8 : 08] To lay down his life for the sake of the world. And I hope it's becoming clear that you see that this world needed Jesus to do that. God is not ambivalent to the evil that he sees in this world.

I was trying to think of an illustration today, yesterday, sorry, when I was preparing this to get this across. I suppose it would be like you were sitting in a courtroom and the verdict had been given. The person was found guilty of murder. But the judge, for some reason, said, Yes, you're guilty, but I'm going to let you off scot-free. You can imagine the outrage. Well, make no mistake.

God is outraged at the fact that our world is so very unlovable. And that's why Jesus had to die. Die in our place. Here then is the proof of God's love.

Now, as I mentioned, coming back to this lovely gift, one of the best gifts I've ever received, and it was given to me by my flatmate, is this picture of my wife and I on Christmas. And it's not because it's expensive, but because it's my favorite person capturing a very special moment.

[9 : 15] And I want to make absolutely clear, there is no way, no way I would ever give her for anyone in this room. Yet here is the love of God.

Think about it, parents. Would you give your child for me? Or think, who is it that you love most in the world? Would you give them for someone in this room?

But extend it further than that. Would you give your loved one for an enemy? No, you would not. And yet the shocking reality is, that is exactly, exactly what God has done for you in his son. God loves you. And the proof of that love is his son nailed to a cross for you. God so loved the world that he gave his only son.

Gave his only son for an unlovable world and an unlovable people. And this brings me on to my final point, the goal of God's love, eternal life. And finally, we see the reason in those last few verses, words, sorry, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

[10:34] Why would God give his son for his enemy? Why would God give his son to save an unlovable world? Well, the outrageous reality is, that God sent his son, because he wants to spend an eternity with you.

He does not want you to perish. But notice with me the choice, and I really need us to hear this this morning. If you only take away one thing, please let it be this.

All of humanity, all of us here, fall into one of two camps. And it's in our verse. Whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

The choice is clear. We will either perish, or have eternal life with God. There is no middle ground. Because of our rebellion against God, because we are not lovable, we all deserve to perish.

And perish here, well, it means an eternity cut off from God. An eternity spent under his judgment because of the way I have treated him, and the way we have treated him.

[11:42] To perish separated from my creator for eternity, make no mistake, make no mistake, is to die utterly without hope. A picture which the Bible calls hell.

And as our verse makes clear, there is only one, only one way to escape perishing. Belief in the Son. Belief in the Lord Jesus.

Because you see, the outrageous truth of that first Christmas, of why Jesus came into the world, is because Jesus perished on the cross, in your place.

So you have a choice this morning. Allow Jesus to perish for you, or choose to perish yourself. And this may mean you have to confront the reality that whilst you might think you are good enough for God, you are not.

None of us are. I am certainly not. Because you see, I think this is one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible. It might be one of the most famous. Most people have heard it, most people have learnt it at Sunday school, and think, ah, that's nice.

[12:48] Nice for them that have that belief. Not for me, obviously, but nice for them. But that misses the problem of that little word, whoever.

Because we are all, either in or out. You either believe, and are saved by Jesus' death for you, or you choose to perish yourself.

This is not a nice for them verse. This is that everyone, the priest, and the prostitute, the banker, and the baker, the doctor, and the destitute, the preacher, and the parishioner, all need the saving work of the Lord Jesus.

God loves you, and he has proven his love for you by his son on a cross for you. You are more loved than you ever dared imagine. Now, I can hear somebody saying, but Benji, that can't be right. I'm a good person. Of course, God loves me. If I got up to the pearly gates, and God asked me if I'd led a good life, I'm sure I would say yes, and he would agree. But look at the cross.

[13:57] What does it say about our world? What does it say about us? If the only thing that could save us is a man dying brutally in our place. And I can hear another person saying, but Benji, you don't understand.

God could never love me. You have no idea of the things I have done. Well, wonderfully, the answer is the same. God has sent his son to die for you on the cross.

You are more loved than you could ever dare imagine. He loves you. But I hear another person say, but Benji, no, no, no, you don't understand. God could never love me.

I've had such horrendous things done to me. Well, again, the answer is the same. Look at the cross. God has given his son for you. You are more loved than you ever dared imagine.

But yet I hear another person say, Benji, you don't understand. God could never love me. I've treated him with such disdain. Well, again, the answer is the same.

[14:57] Look at the cross. You are more loved than you ever dared imagine. Here then, to finish, is the message of Christmas from the lips of Jesus himself.

God's love, God's love, in sending his son to be born in a manger for the sole and only purpose, to die on the cross for you. I have two applications.

First, to the Christian. I think the only thing we can do from this is consider the awesome God that we follow. Consider the God who would be willing to give his son for you and for me.

I think we should be on our knees in prayer and worship every day because of the outrageous reality of what he's done. But to those of us here who wouldn't call ourselves a Christian, to those looking in at the Christian faith, well, I think this verse leaves you with the fact that you need to make a decision on the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

There is only two camps. Will you accept his love for you? Will you accept his perishing for you? We're running a short course. It's three nights long across three weeks, only an hour, where we're looking at the claims that Jesus makes and it would be a great opportunity to ask those questions to see if this is true.

[16 : 14] But friends, you are more loved, accepted and cherished than you ever dared imagine. Will you accept that love, that outrageous, cross-shaped love this Christmas?

Why don't I lead us in prayer as we close? Dear Lord, we thank you that you sent your only son to die for us on the cross.

Please, Father, would we put our trust in him and trust in his perishing for us for the rest of our days. Amen. Amen.