

Carols by Candlelight: The baby with two names

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Preacher: Nigel Styles

[0 : 0 0] So, Matthew 1, 18-25. Now, the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But, as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and he called his name Jesus. In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

[1 : 2 7] This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Taddea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in the same region, there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear.

And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

[3 : 0 3] The fourth reading is from the first chapter of the Gospel of John. John, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.

He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him.

Yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

[4 : 22] And the word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

No one has ever seen God, the only God, who is at the Father's side. He has made him known. Well, good evening.

I can't see if there's anybody out there. You could have all left the room. Make polite noise, so I know you're still there. I've been asked to speak for just a few minutes, and to help us see from the Bible something of what the Bible says is the true meaning of Christmas.

Simon says, I'm a member here at Grace Church. My name is Nigel Stiles. As you may know, Nigels are nearing extinction. No British babies were given the name Nigel in 2016.

We await with bated breath the results for 2017. According to the Evening Standard last month, Mr. Farage is to blame. We don't like him, we don't like his name.

[5 : 36] So blame Brexit for everything I say. In terms of girl names, it's no change. Still, Amelia and Olivia top the list. And for boys' names, it's Oliver, Harry and George.

But Nigel? Well, in our heyday, in 1964, we peaked as the 23rd most popular name.

But now, in 2017, what can I say? I'm almost one of a kind. When a new baby is born, everybody wants to know, don't they?

What's it called? What's its name? There's a tribe in New Guinea, I understand, who had heard some English words and liked the sound of them.

They didn't know what they meant, but they just liked what they sounded like. So they called some of their children by these words. So one man in the tribe was named Tinned Fish.

[6 : 37] Somebody else was called Second Gear. Some names are chosen because of what they mean, not just because of what they sound like.

Nigel, by the way, doesn't mean loser. It actually means champion. So what is the Christmas baby called?

What's its name? Well, here's the weird thing. The baby in the haystack actually has two names. You could call this, talk, the baby with two names.

I don't know whether you noticed that in one of the readings that we had today. The heavenly messenger said to Joseph, Mary, your wife, will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

All this took place to fulfill the words of the prophet, you shall call his name Emmanuel. So Joseph called him Jesus. Huh? So what is his name?

[7 : 44] Jesus. Jesus. Or Emmanuel. And the answer is both. He is Emmanuel, a name which means God with us.

He is Jesus, a name which means God saves. Put those two together. And that is what Christmas is all about.

I want to just think about those two names for a few minutes this evening. So here's the first one. That he is God come to be with us. His name is Emmanuel. Noel Coward was once asked what he thought of God.

And he replied. And he replied. This is my attempt at a Noel Coward accent. Well, we've never been properly introduced. And if God never had made the first move, we would never have got to know him.

But God did make the first move. But God did make the first move. Jesus came. God with us. But once Jesus came.

[8 : 49] When Emmanuel came. When God came to be with us. He was introducing himself to us. He gave the answer to those questions.

You know, God are you there? God do you love me? God how can I know you? Emmanuel came to establish relationship. Peter Wilby was the editor of the New Statesman until some years ago.

He was an atheist as well. Perhaps surprisingly, he goes to church at Christmas. He says his reason is he goes as a protest against all the commercial baggage and babble that he hates that surrounds the festival.

So not a bad reason to be here tonight. I'm here as a protest. Everybody loves a good story, he says. And he says that Christianity has got the best good story.

He said this. An omnipotent God who chooses to be incarnated as a human. Born in the most humble circumstances imaginable.

[9 : 58] Whether or not we are believers, we should celebrate that story and ponder its meaning. Emmanuel, God with us.

This is, of course, why we give presents at Christmas. Because God gave at Christmas. Don't know how you're getting on with your Christmas gift list if you're struggling.

Man, I know we've still got to wait till Christmas Eve. There's no panic. But if you are struggling, spare a thought, won't you, for Meghan Markle. Think of the trouble she's got with her Christmas list.

She's suddenly aware of all her future in-laws she's now got to buy presents for. And what do you buy the woman who has got everything? Literally. We often say that charity begins at home.

But actually, of course, charity begins with God. The good God. The good God who is highlighted at Christmas. Who looks and doesn't just see needy people.

[10 : 59] But he sees a world with all kinds of needs. And gives to that needy world extravagantly. Not with a check.

But he gives himself. Emmanuel. God with us. That's the heartbeat of Christian giving. God establishes relationship.

He gives himself. Of course, many of us respond to this without fully appreciating who God is. Totally underestimating the significance of the relationship that he is introducing.

We treat God as if he was the AA man. You know, the fourth emergency service. We get on the end of the prayer line when we need him.

But most of the time we leave him in the background. We're happy to call him out when we break down or have a flat tire. But most of the time we hope we'll never bother to see him.

[12 : 00] And God with immense kindness. With extraordinary condescension. wants to be your friend.

And not just a Facebook friend. But a real friend. Of course, some of us may worry about that. Worry what God may make of us.

And of course, all the stuff going on with Brexit has made us think about people who we thought were friends but aren't our friends anymore. All the stuff with America. We're thinking the same. What's a special relationship?

What might God think of us? Would he like me? Would he approve of me? Would he accept me? That's why it's so good that the baby has got its other name as well.

Emmanuel. Which means God's with us. And Jesus. A name which means the Lord saves. And Jesus is called Jesus because, well, because he does what it says on the birth certificate.

[13 : 07] He brings rescue. 2017 might have been a great year for you or it might have been a very dark year. I wonder if your experience of the year has been dark.

I wonder why you think the world is so dark. Why it's messed up. What your explanation is for a messed up world. You know, for terrorism. For genocide.

For suffering. For death. What do you think is the reason? Do you think all the problems are out there? Do you think any of the problems are in here? The man who wrote Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Robert Louis Stevenson. The author. He recognized that he was both Jekyll and Hyde. The good and the evil. He said they were both inside him.

And the world is like it is because people live here. People like us. Who do do extraordinary acts of kindness. And do terrible acts of malevolence.

[14 : 12] Sins. And not just towards one another. But most terribly of course against God. It's an uncomfortable truth. But a true truth.

That at Christmas. God says you have wronged me. You need a saviour. And I am the one who has come to be that saviour that you need.

I've come to rescue you. Jesus. The Lord saves. We like to think that Christmas is really for the children.

Isn't it? It's all kind of angels and fluffy sheep. And a twinkling star and a snuggly baby. Whereas Easter is not really for the children.

Is it? Nails. A whip. Blood. Allegations of body snatching. It's not good for people of a nervous disposition.

[15 : 11] They do better to think about spring bunnies and chickens. And wait for a rerun of Christmas. And not ask too many questions about what Jesus did when he grew up.

And whether the cradle and the cross are connected. Because of course Christmas is about Easter. The birth of Jesus is about the death of Jesus.

His birth. His life. His death. His resurrection. Our one great rescue mission. Jesus. The Lord saves. He brings rescue.

I have a friend who spent his gap year in East Africa. And one day for a day off on this gap year.

A group of friends went to the beach. And it was a very hot day. He was lying on his lilo in the shallow water. And dozing in the hot sun. He suddenly realized it had all gone quiet.

[16 : 13] And realized he dropped off to sleep. He sat up on his lilo and saw that he'd drifted out into the Indian Ocean. So far in fact that all around him wherever he looked.

He could not see any land at all. Nothing on any horizon. What should he do? Should he swim? But he'd been told there were sharks in the Indian Ocean.

Should he just lie there and wait? But what if nobody came? That's a terrible dilemma. Never. And he was saying to me how he had 45 minutes of lying there.

45 minutes to contemplate the end of his life. Not sure what he should do. And there was nothing he could do. Unless somebody came to rescue him. Fortunately somebody did.

His friends on the beach noticed he'd gone. They'd alerted the whatever. And they'd come out in a boat to rescue him. Can you imagine the relief? When this guy in his lilo sees the boat coming towards him.

[17 : 18] Jesus came as a searching lifeboat like that. When he came to be with us. He came to rescue us. To save us.

From all that we do that makes our world as it is. And makes our future as dark as it is. Jesus came to bring rescue.

If you're a guest here tonight. You might like to ask the Christian who invited you tonight. What does it mean for you to say that Jesus saved you? Rescued you? What is that?

What does that mean? That's what his names mean. Emmanuel. It means God with us.

It's about relationship. Jesus means he will save from sin. It's about rescue. Relationship. And rescue.

[18 : 17] Imagine you were with a group of people. And you point out somebody. And you say who's that over there? One person in the group might say oh he's my dad.

Somebody else might say that's Alan. Somebody else might say he's the new head teacher. Somebody else might say he's been appointed to sort out.

To rescue this failing school. And you get the whole story by putting all the comments together. Don't you? That's my dad Alan. Who's been appointed as head teacher to rescue the school.

Put together the two names of this little baby. And you get the whole story. The Christmas baby. Emmanuel. Jesus. Relationship.

Rescue. God with us. To save us from our sins. Or perhaps even more simply. God has come to us. To rescue us. As Peter Wilby said.

[19 : 22] We should celebrate that story. And ponder its meaning. Ponder it. Well. You could do worse. Couldn't you? Than read the Bible. I mean.

You could read just a bit of it. That book that Simon mentioned. That you can pick up. On the way out. One of the freebies tonight. Lee Mack. When he was. The comedian Lee Mack. When he was on Desert Island Discs.

Was talking about. How people like me. In his forties. Sorry. That's. People like Lee Mack. In his forties. You understand. Who dismiss it. The Bible. But never read it.

He was being told. The Bible's on the island. Would that be any use to you? And he was saying. I'm just one of those. People who dismiss the Bible. Never read it. But. It's a book. That purports. To tell you everything.

And he. Said on Desert Island Discs. You know. If a Martian came to me. And said. You've got a book. That purports to tell you. Everything you need to know. What's it like? And Lee Mack. Said. Well I have to say.

[20 : 15] I don't know. I've never read it. And what an odd thing. That would be. Isn't that an odd thing? Here is Jesus. Jesus. Who has come. Into the world. To us.

To rescue us. And. I don't know very much. About what he came to do. So maybe. Pondering. That. This Christmas. Would mean. Taking a bit of the Bible.

And reading it. Maybe doing it with somebody else. A guided reading. One to one. Maybe. Signing up for that. Christianity explored course. Using that tear off slip. In the order of service. Tonight.

But it's worth pondering. Isn't it? I mean. If it purports. To be. This. God came to us. To rescue us. And it's certainly.

Something worth. Celebrating. Isn't it? It's worth a huge. Feast. And parties. And celebrations. And. All that we fill. Christmas with. I mean. God certainly thought that.

[21 : 12] Didn't he? Pulled out all the stops. He sent an angel. A huge. Warrior of light. He put a special. Star in the sky. Eye blazing in the darkness.

To spotlight this one. He sent the choir along. To sing at the top of their voices. He's here. He's come. Go and see him. Ponder him. Celebrate him.

For God has come to us. To rescue us. Emmanuel. Jesus. Relationship. Rescue. Rescue. Let me lead us in a prayer.

Let's pray as we sit. Lord Jesus. We thank you so very much. That you came to this world.

As God. With us. Thank you that you came. To establish. Friendship. With us. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[22 : 13] That you want. A relationship. With us. Not to condemn us. But to save us. Thank you. Lord Jesus.

That you came. To rescue. Us. From sin. Thank you. For. How wonderful. It is. To know that we're not left.

Abandoned. In the universe. But that you have come. As the lifeboat. To save us. Please would you help us.

This Christmas time. To ponder. This true meaning. Of Christmas. And to celebrate. All that you have done. For us. And we ask this.

In your name. Amen.