

Christmas Day Talk 2023

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 December 2023

Preacher: Benji Cook

[0 : 0 0] John chapter 1, verses 1 to 13. 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 testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light. He came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him.

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, or a husband's will, but born of God.

Our second reading is from John chapter 1, starting at verse 14. John chapter 1, verses 14.

[2 : 0 9] Grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God, and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Well, very good morning, ladies and gents. As was mentioned, my name is Benji. I want to have the first opportunity to say a very warm Christmas to you all.

Now, I want you to think to yourself, how do I know someone? I want you to imagine, in your mind, your best friend in the whole entire world. Maybe they're here. Maybe you can give them a warm hug right now. But we're British, of course we're not going to do that.

So I want you to imagine your best friend in the whole entire world. How is it that you know that person? Maybe it was a, I don't know, you went to camp together. Maybe you were friends at school together. Maybe you were forced into an awkward HR interaction with a trust game, and then suddenly you became firm friends.

I don't know. How is it that you came to know your favorite person and to know your friend? And there's a whole variety of ways that we can get to know someone, isn't there? It could be through conversation.

[3 : 1 8] They could tell us something about themselves. Well, I don't have many friends this Christmas. That is pathetic. I don't have many friends at all this Christmas.

But, very kindly, a member of the church family has given me a friend, or a potential friend. You won't be able to, thank goodness he's still alive.

For those of you with very, very perceptive eyesight, this is Tetris the fish. There is a fish in here. Very, very good. There is a fish. Now, I really want a friend this Christmas, and wonderfully, apparently Tetris doesn't have many friends either.

So, I get to be friends with Tetris. But I don't know how to know Tetris. So, I've got some suggestions that my wife has helped me with. Why don't we all, we're all going to wave at Tetris.

Now, the way this works, by the way, ladies and gents, is I'm getting up here talking to a fish.

Therefore, there's going to be this interaction where we are all going to talk to the fish. And if I see some of you not talking to the fish, then I will make you stand up and talk to the fish by yourself.

[4 : 2 2] So, we are going to talk to the fish. Okay. So, first of all, we're all going to start by waving at Tetris. Waving at Tetris. Very good. Very good. No.

Oh, gosh, he stopped moving. We'll just carry on. It looks like Tetris isn't responding. He doesn't want to be my friend yet. Well, that's very sad. Well, maybe if we all, therefore, quietly say hello to Tetris, maybe that will work.

So, we're going to go quietly. But on the count of three, we're all going to say hello to Tetris. Okay. One, two, three. Hello. Oh, he's moving. Thank goodness. Okay. Very good. No, we're still not

friends.

That's very, very sad. Okay. Finally, penultimately, sorry, Finding Nemo. Who's seen Finding Nemo here? The greatest film ever. So, if I was to say fish are friends.

Okay. So, the way the chant goes is fish are friends, not food. Maybe poor Tetris is thinking that because I like battered fish that I might be, you know, kind of buttering them up, literally, to take him away and eat him later on.

[5 : 32] So, maybe if we reassure Tetris, he will be my friend. So, we're going to, on the count of three, I'm going to say fish are friends, and then we're all going to say not food. Very good. Genius.

Okay. One, two, three. Fish are friends. Are fish. Still nothing. So, this is very, very sad. I'm not entirely sure how it is that I'm supposed to know Tetris.

There's no way, it seems, that I can know Tetris because I want to be his friend, but I can't. Now, this is a slightly silly illustration to show that unless Tetris reveals something about himself to me, other than the fact that, obviously, he is a fish, I can't know him.

And it's exactly the same with God. We had read in our reading, I wonder if you noticed that verse, the final verse in verse 18, Now, I wonder if you noticed that first little clause.

Thank you for putting it up on the screen. No one has ever seen God. Now, I wonder what you think about that claim this Christmas. I wonder what you think about that claim.

[6 : 45] It means that all religious people, if it isn't focused on this God, well, they haven't seen God. It means that if you are of any other religious persuasion, it means that any other kind of religious experience.

John is making quite an offensive claim here, potentially, this Christmas. He's saying no one has ever seen God. But we know, and the young children have been learning in Sunday school, that God has made everything just by speaking.

And so this is quite a staggering claim that John is making, that how can God make the entire world make you and me? And yet we don't know him. And we're going to come back to that in our second talk.

How is it, therefore, if no one has seen God, how is it that we can know him? That's what we'll see in our second talk. But just speaking to the adults in the room for a second. If you wouldn't call yourself a follower of Jesus, I would be really interested to know what you make of this claim.

The claim is staggering, and it is offensive that the most fundamental truth that God has made humanity, and we do not know him. Do we see that in the verse?

[7 : 50] No one has ever seen God. What do you think about that? It means that the secular, the Muslim, the moral, the atheist, none of us understand the most fundamental truth of Christmas.

No one has seen God. I wonder what you make of that claim. And it is a claim of utter exclusivity. John is not holding back. This isn't very PC.

This wouldn't pass necessarily in our HR end of year review. That no matter the spiritual experience, no matter the religion that we grew up with, no matter if we were christened, we've never seen God.

And therefore, it begs the question, if we've not seen God, how do we know him? Clearly, I don't know Tetris very well yet. But the stakes are far higher when it comes to God, the God who made us, the God who loved us.

How can I know God? But John, wonderfully, he will give us the answer, in fact, in the rest of that verse, but also in verse 14, which we'll come back to in our second talk. Now, because it's been so long since you last heard me speak, we're going to do a very, very quick recap.

[8 : 59] We saw that we can't know God unless he tells us something about him. We can't know God unless he tells us something about him. And that's obviously the same with Tetris.

Tetris has told me nothing about him. He's playing very hard to get. In fairness, if I was a fish, I would do the same. And it's the same with God. We can't know God unless he tells us something about himself.

You see, that's hard for God. He's not like us. He's big. We're small. He's powerful. We're weak. He's perfect. We're sinful. How can we know God if he's so unlike us?

Well, here's my next brilliant illustration. Now, who here knows what cadets is? Does anyone know what cadets is? Cadets? CCF? No?

Very good. Basically, it's where young chaps and ladies play at being in the army. But don't say that to them because they get very, very offended if you say they're just playing. Now, when I was at

school, I was in cadets.

[9 : 56] I managed all of six months before I was naughty and was asked to leave. And for the adults in the room, it was called rank insubordination. I still don't know what that means. But here we are. And this is my – I did get to go on one exercise.

This is my tent. This is the tent, by the way, ladies and gentlemen, that I took on exercise. Through the Brecon Beacons for three nights. Three of us slept side by side for three nights in this tent in winter.

It was a wonderful bonding experience. Now, I want us, with our imaginations, okay, to imagine that this tent is our world. And I am God.

This is purely an illustration. And I want us to imagine, therefore, that – and God, well, he knew, didn't he, that we've been saying that we couldn't know him. He knew that unless God showed himself to us, unless he revealed himself to us, we would never know him as we should.

But so God came from outside of our world, and he came down to it that first Christmas. Can I get verse 14 up, chapter 1, verse 14, on the screen? The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

[11 : 07] We've seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. So, in other words, and here is some brilliant illustrative metaphor, as you can see, very roomy.

God, that's me, in case you were wondering, God got into our world. That's what John 14 is saying. He was outside, and then he got into our world. That's what John 14 is saying.

The word became flesh. And we understand that in John's gospel to mean that God, in the person of Jesus, came down that first Christmas. He was a man like us.

Jesus slept like you. Jesus, I presume, was excited for Christmas, just like you this morning, because it was actually his birthday. Not all of us who just somehow get presents on his behalf. But most of all, he came and died for us. He died for us to take away our sin. So that now, if anyone believes in Jesus, that's the wonderful message of Christmas.

[12 : 06] They can know God. Let's read verse 18 again. Let's read verse 18 again for us. No one has ever seen God. That's what we saw in the first talk. None of us know the creator of the universe.

But the one and only son, Jesus, who is himself God's and is in closest relationship with the Father, he has made him known. And he did it through a baby in a manger.

The Lord Jesus Christ. Again, speaking to the adults in the room, John doesn't let us say that we can kind of make up our own thoughts about what God is like.

I wonder if you've ever spoken to a friend who's not religious and they might say something like, well, I think God is like dot, dot, dot. And they might say a lovely power in the sky.

They might say a man with a fluffy beard who's chubby and happy all the time. They might say someone who's not particularly nice and not particularly interested. But do we see that John is making the claim that, no, no, no, it's not that we get to look up at God and say, I think you're like this.

[13 : 08] It's that God has looked down to us and sent his son so that we might know him. Now, my wife is dangerously allergic to peanuts and eggs. And she told me that on our first date.

She was like, please don't order any food because I want to eat your food. By the way, if you get into a relationship, that's apparently what happens. They just eat your food. No one ever tells you that, by the way, to be prepared.

Anyway, so she told me I'm hideously allergic to peanuts. Please don't order them. Now, imagine that this Christmas I decided, you know, I think my wife is someone who loves peanuts.

She's also allergic to egg and egg. So I'm going to make her a lovely peanut butter sponge cake. And I'm going to use extra egg and extra peanut butter. And I run upstairs because I'm so excited and I've made the cake and it's full of peanut butter and it's full of egg.

And I open the door and go, darling, Merry Christmas. I've made you your favorite peanut butter and egg cake. And she would look at me and rightly say, you've not listened.

[14 : 08] Why are you trying to kill me on Christmas Day? In other words, it's very, very disrespectful, isn't it, for her to tell me what she's like and then for me to completely ignore it.

Well, ladies and gents, the claim this morning is that God has done that in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. We don't get to say, John is saying, that I think God is like, dot, dot, dot.

No, God has said, I am like. And he sent the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the stakes are much higher, aren't they? We know that this Christmas.

They're much higher. God made us. He made us for him and he's told us what he's like. Now, as I close, there are John's Gospels on your seats.

I would highly commend taking these away to have a read over Christmas because in this, God has explicitly told us what he is like. It would take you about an hour to read this eyewitness account.

[15 : 03] But can I say, it will be the most thrilling and potentially dangerous read of your entire life. You will see a man who has such perfect compassion that he touches the leper.

You will see a man who loves and respects women so much that his attitude towards the prostitutes and the destitute would put our woke culture to shame. And you would see a man who has such outrageous love that he would come into the world to be born, to die for it on a cross.

God has told us what he's like. And can I say, it is not a boring read, nor is it an irrelevant read. It is a stunning read. And that God presented himself fundamentally in the form of his son dying on the cross for you and for me.

God has made himself known. God has made himself known. We can know him. And he is Jesus. So therefore, I commend that to you. And we at Grace Church Dulwich wish you a very warm and lovely Christmas.