

Carols by Candlelight

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0:00] Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 20. In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 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 Judea, 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 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.

[1:18] 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.

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us. And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Let me add my welcome to Ben's. My name is Simon Dowdy. I'm the minister of Grace Church Dulwich.

[2:31] And we'd like you all here for our Christingle Carol Service. I realise you may not have a clue what I look like, but hopefully you can hear me. Now, over the last few months, the issue of fake news has hit the media.

Both Facebook and Google have been under fire after several widely read stories in their websites turned out to be fakes. Along that is with the suggestion that fake news may well have influenced the outcome of the US election.

Apparently, the top fake election stories were shared more widely on social media than the top real election stories. Meanwhile, the Oxford Dictionary has named post-truth its word of the year.

The term describes circumstances in which facts are less important to people than stories which simply appeal to their emotions, even though they may be incorrect.

In other words, if it feels right, or if something says what I feel comfortable with, then that is more important than whether it is true. So I want to ask the question this afternoon, is Christmas simply another fake news story?

[3:50] Is it another post-truth concept? In other words, something people believe, not because it's true, but just because it happens to feel right. It fits in with people's worldview.

So what we're going to do is we're going to look at that reading from Luke's Gospel. It's been printed on the service sheet. I think it's up on the screen. And we're going to try and understand together this afternoon what was really going on when Jesus Christ was born.

After all, I take it that's one of the reasons we're here. Great to sing carols, but good as well, isn't it, to be reminded of what it is that lies at the very heart of that first Christmas.

I want us to notice, first of all, that Christmas is real news, not fake news. Real news, not fake news. You may know that Luke, who wrote Luke's Gospel, is generally regarded as an excellent historian. He tells us he's put together a carefully ordered account. He's using eyewitness evidence. That reading begins with the birth of Jesus at the time when Caesar Augustus was the Roman emperor, when Quirinius was the governor of Syria.

[5:00] As you read through Luke's Gospel, you find that all his facts about the important people of the day, people like Caiaphas, the high priest, John the Baptist, Herod the king, Pontius Pilate, and so on, they are all confirmed by the historians of the day, people like Philo, Josephus, and Tacitus.

In other words, what Luke is telling us is that these events really happened. He goes to great lengths to ensure that what he wrote in his Gospel is true.

He begins by saying the very reason he's writing his Gospel is to give us certainty and confidence about who Jesus is and why he came. His is the language of history, certainty, eyewitness accounts.

Now, there are, of course, aren't there, plenty of myths surrounding Christmas. Luke makes no mention of an innkeeper or a stable or even animals. And I take it if anyone is here and you've had responsibility for organising a school nativity or something like that, then that's bad news simply because you don't have enough parts to go around.

Not to mention, of course, the big myth of Christmas, Father Christmas himself. I take it I can say that in this company. But a few years ago, the Guardian newspaper estimated that if every child who believed in Father Christmas were to receive a visit from him, then he'd need 214,200 reindeer and have to travel at the speed of 650 miles per second if everyone was to be visited.

[6:40] Now, sadly, there are many people who put the figure of Jesus Christ in that same bracket of myth, along with Father Christmas and the flying snowman and, no doubt, many others.

There's something, perhaps, that's nice for the children, but come off it, we're grown-ups. And, frankly, we've grown out of that kind of thing. But, no, Jesus Christ belongs to the world of facts, of history.

Perhaps you've read Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*, in which case I hope you were disappointed that one of the things he fails to do is to engage with the historical facts that we have about Jesus Christ.

So, Caesar Augustus really was the Roman Emperor. Joseph and Mary, they really went down to Bethlehem. The baby was really born. The angels really appeared to the shepherds.

The shepherds really went to see. They then went to tell others. So, what should our response be? Well, just as Luke says, when the shepherds heard the message of the angels, they said to each other, let's go and see if this is true.

[7:46] And I take it that we should do the same. And, actually, Christmas is a great opportunity to ask ourselves the question, have we really considered the facts?

Because what we're being told here is real news. It's not fake news. But, secondly, Luke is telling us about a real saviour, not a fake saviour.

Just look at those verses there up on the screen, verses 10 and 11, if you want to follow them in the order of service. The angel says to the shepherds, 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. When the lunar module from the Apollo 11 spacecraft landed on the moon on the 20th of July 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first person to walk on the moon's surface and did so with the now famous words, that's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.

But, actually, what we are being told here, this announcement from the angels to the shepherds, is far more momentous than that.

[9:05] Because this is about God himself, the creator, stepping into his world. But you say, why did he come?

Well, again, you'll see in the words of the angel, he was born a saviour, a rescuer. But, obviously, that begs the question, doesn't it? What do we need to be rescued from?

And the Bible's answer is sin. By which the Bible does not mean simply all those things which appear on the front page of the tabloid newspapers. Rather, the attitude that is in each one of us, which is that I don't want God to be God of my life.

We may still believe in God, we may not. We may still go to church, or we may not. But it's saying, I will get on with my life in my way without God.

In terms of day-to-day life and day-to-day decisions, I am the one who runs life my way. And, of course, the way in which our secular culture celebrates Christmas is a brilliant illustration of that, isn't it?

[10:11] The whole focus on presents, on decorations, on food and drink, on friends and family, watching lots of telly, and then rushing off to the sales, both beforehand and afterwards.

While the saviour who is born, Christ who is the Lord, hardly gets a look in. The problem of what the Bible calls sin. But I've said that Christmas is about the birth of a real saviour, and not a fake saviour, because throughout history, mankind has looked to human saviours, human solutions, to the problems of the world.

Indeed, Caesar Augustus himself, along with other Roman emperors, was referred to in the propaganda of the Roman Empire of the day as a saviour. But history shows the failure of those saviours.

Just think of the last hundred years. In 1920, the League of Nations was set up to save the world from future global conflicts. It failed. The United Nations has scarcely been more successful, set up in 1946.

In 1964, Julian Huxley wrote an essay, *The New Divinity*, arguing that human potential represented the greatest resource for solving the world's problems.

[11:35] In 1973, the Humanist Manifesto appealed to technology as the new saviour. As someone who grew up in the 1980s, it was free market economics.

In the 1990s, it was the spread of democracy. In the 2000s, it was globalisation. And yet, of course, with the economic crisis since 2008, with the Bank of England governor telling us ten days ago that Britain faces its first lost decade since the 1860s, not to mention the political route represented by Brexit and Trump and the referendum, the vote in Italy ten days ago and who knows where else in 2017.

Now, I'm not making political comments. Far from it. But I think it does beg the question, doesn't it? What is really wrong with our world?

Surely, the history of the last hundred years shows us there is far more wrong with our world than simply not having the right political and economic policies or not harnessing technology in the best possible way.

Here's G.K. Chesterton, one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, who, having received an inquiry sent out by the Times newspaper asking the question, what is wrong with the world, simply replied by writing to the editor, Dear Sir, I am yours sincerely, G.K. Chesterton.

[13:03] And that, you see, is the Bible's diagnosis, that we've all turned our backs on God. That is what is wrong with our world, and we all face the judgment.

So just ask yourself, you see, does the diagnosis fit? I look at my own life, and it does fit. What about yours?

And it's why, you see, this announcement of the birth of Jesus of God's real Savior is so very, very wonderful. Jesus was born that first Christmas in order to die to rescue us.

Those little baby hands, when he was grown up, were nailed to a cross for us, such that all those who trust in him might be forgiven and right with God.

That's why the angels celebrate by saying, glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, amongst whom he is well pleased. Now, I don't know what you really celebrated this last year.

[14:12] I guess if we went around the room, there'd be loads of different things, wouldn't we, that all of us have celebrated in the last year. I guess as a nation, what we celebrated the most is probably the Olympics.

It seemed, didn't it, as if day after day after day, as if medals just sort of fell into our laps, or at least those of us who are watching it on telly, that was the impression. I'm sure those who are actually taking part in the Olympic Games, I take it as much harder than that.

Well, here is something even more wonderful. This is the real peace that Christmas brings. Peace with God for all those who trust in Jesus Christ and follow him.

The peace that prays, knowing that God is listening as our Heavenly Father. The peace of a clear conscience between us and God.

The peace that at the end knows that beyond death, we'll be welcomed by God, not as judge, but as saviour. Christmas is about real news, not fake news.

[15:15] The birth of a real saviour. The answer to the world's biggest problem, not a fake saviour. Finally, will you just notice the other thing the angel says?

The birth of Jesus is good news, a great joy that will be for all the people. Now, I don't know if this is true for you, but it seems to me it's very easy to imagine that Christianity is only good news for some people.

Perhaps old people or young people. Perhaps good people or religious people or people who like singing carols or who like going to church buildings, that kind of thing.

But actually, if that is what we think, then we need to think again. These shepherds were rough, working-class men, and the angel says to them, this is good news of great joy for all people.

Now, I have no idea where you stand on all this. It may well be that you don't regard yourself as a Christian at all, in which case we're delighted you're here this afternoon.

[16:17] But can I encourage you not to dismiss the events of that first Christmas as fake news? Not to respond to it as post-truth.

This doesn't fit my world view. I find it challenging, so I'm just going to leave it on one side. We're running a course in the new year called Christianity Explored. There are details of that course just on the tear-off slip on the side of the service sheet there.

It's a course which is run by churches up and down the country. It's a great way, if you've never done so, of investigating the facts of Jesus Christ and doing so as a consenting adult, so to speak. There's a tear-off slip and a tick box which you can tick. And if a course isn't your thing, there's also a box you can tick if you'd appreciate to investigate a guided reading through a gospel, which is something which many have appreciated.

And there's a box just at the back by the door for those tear-off slips. It may, of course, be that you're here this afternoon and you would consider yourself to be a Christian. But perhaps if you're honest, things are all a little bit hazy.

[17:26] Perhaps as you hear about the certainty that Luke writes to give, you're thinking to yourself, I would love to be sure. I would love to have that kind of certainty.

Well, in which case, that Christianity Explore course or the guided read-through would be a great thing to do in the new year. And as for those who do know the certainty of Jesus as Savior, then I wish you a very Jesus-centered Christmas.

Thank you, Q■ Nejbj Hu. And I would love to go to give the gospel next time.

That's what they call the recruits. One of our instintors that Christ esos Charles Holl■ and hisounts Cent Intel and his faithful followers and their holy he his almost Mo■e to the iPod to the HOL person and his family. I would love to my people and his family.

And I would love to Herz and the devil,