

Carol service

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Date: 13 December 2015

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] Our first reading this morning is from the book of Isaiah, chapter 11, verses 1 to 9. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit, and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord, he shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear. But with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth, and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, the young shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the whole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adders down.

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

[1 : 37] The second reading comes from the Gospel of Matthew, and beginning at verse 18.

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.

[2 : 58] He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and he called his name Jesus. Our third reading is also from Matthew's Gospel.

It's chapter 2, verses 1 to 12. Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

For we saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him, and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them whether Christ was to be born.

They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet, And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah.

For from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly, and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.

[4 : 20] And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word that I too may come and worship him. After listening to the king, they went on their way.

And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Our last reading this morning is from John's Gospel, chapter 1, verses 1 to 14 and verse 18, and this one is printed in your service sheets.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made.

[5 : 34] Without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 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 recognize 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. The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

[6 : 40] We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Let me add my welcome. My name is Simon Dowdy. I'm the minister here at Grace Church, and it's very good to have you with us for our carol service this morning. Now, in recent years, the weepy John Lewis advert has become as much part of Christmas as turkey and tinsel.

If you haven't seen it, this year's, the main character is a young girl called Lily, who loves peering out of her bedroom window through a telescope, and she believes that she has spotted the man on the moon, so much so that actually she even sends the man on the moon a Christmas present.

And it's all acted out to a song with the chorus, You're half the world away. Half the world away, but in her mind's eye at least, no less real.

And I simply want to ask the question this morning, is someone who believes in Jesus Christ and follows Jesus Christ any different from Lily?

[8 : 02] Is Jesus a comforting thought to warm the soul, but no more? Is Jesus real in the sense that the man on the moon may be real to some, but not in the real world of truth and reality?

Well, so far we've heard the events of that first Christmas from our Christmas readings from the Bible. But what I want us to do now is to focus on that one sentence which I've had printed there on the order of service.

It's from the book of 2 Timothy, and it's one of many summary statements in the New Testament which summarize for us who Jesus is and why he came, the significance of Christmas.

Let me read it to you. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel.

It's a sentence which explodes three popular myths about Jesus and about the Christian faith.

[9 : 25] The first myth, that it's irrelevant. A couple of years ago, a journalist from one of the national papers did a Google search of the phrase, it wouldn't be Christmas without.

The top results were, it wouldn't be Christmas without setting off the smoke detector, turkey curry, mince pies, socks, Christmas crackers, presents. It wasn't apparently until you got to page 17 of the Google search that there was any suggestion that there might actually be more to Christmas than food, presents, and telly.

Our culture, you see, assumes either that the real meaning of Christmas is irrelevant or that actually Christmas simply has no real meaning at all.

We're happy to go along with the celebrations, we enjoy the food, it's lovely to have time off work, for some of us to have time with family, but come Boxing Day life moves on and we're off to the sales.

Not helped, I guess, by some nativity plays which also often tell us the events of Christmas but actually don't give us the meaning. So it gives us the impression that either there is no meaning or Christmas is irrelevant.

[10:40] but the Bible doesn't simply give us the facts about Christmas but also the significance of those facts in that some of those readings we've had, we see exactly that, both the birth of Jesus is announced but also the significance of the birth.

In Matthew chapter 1, you shall give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. Now what does it mean for Jesus to be a saviour?

Well, have a look at that verse again that's printed. Christ Jesus who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Now that word life is not simply talking about living, it's talking about having life with God, knowing God, belonging to God as his people, living life as it's meant to be.

And that word immortality is talking about life with God not only now in this world but also in the next world as well. It's what we sing about in some of our best loved carols.

[11:55] So our last hymn this morning, Hark the Herald with the words, Born that man no more may die. Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.

It couldn't be more relevant, could it? Because all of us in this room will die. I guess it's something our culture would rather not talk about or think about.

I guess it's something that if you're in your twenties or younger you probably find it very hard to believe. But once we've reached middle age there is surely no doubt about it whatsoever.

As our bodies decay, as loved ones die, as dreams and ambitions fail. You see, Christianity could not be more relevant however young or old we are.

I wonder if you're familiar with the four stages of Santa Claus. Do you know about the four stages of Santa Claus? Stage one, you believe in Santa Claus. Stage two, you stop believing in Santa Claus.

[12:56] Stage three, you have to act the part of Santa Claus. Stage four, you begin to look like Santa Claus. Now, I don't know which of those four categories you put yourself in but the message of Jesus could not be more relevant regardless of which stage of life we are at.

It is a message about life. Life with God in this world, supremely life with God in the next world. Life as it's meant to be.

The second myth is that there is no evidence. There is no evidence for the Christian faith. The most recent survey out last month indicated that 40% of people in the UK do not believe Jesus Christ was a real figure of history.

Again, not helped perhaps by some of the nativity plays which you may have been to which confuse fact and fiction. So there you have Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus and then because little Alice was so desperate to have a part but actually the truth is she cannot act to save her life there's a reindeer and little Alice is there dressed up as a reindeer.

But you see you don't get reindeer in the Middle East. You see it confuses fact with fiction and so gives the impression that Christianity is untrue.

[14:22] But the reality is that no serious historian doubts the existence of Jesus Christ so look again at that verse from the Bible. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.

Christianity is not an empty myth or idea rather it's about a person Jesus Christ the word Christ not simply being Jesus' surname but actually the word Christ being Jesus' title it means God's king, or God's ruler. Here is the reminder you see that right at the very beginning of time Jesus was at the very heart of God's plans for his world.

It's why throughout the Old Testament the first part of the Bible God tells us that his king Jesus will come into the world the creator who made the world will come where he'll be born what he'll be like what he will do his character that he'll die on a cross that he'll be raised to life three days later and at the end of history that he'll return to judge.

So that first reading which we had from the book of Isaiah was written 700 years before the birth of Jesus. Other predictions in the Old Testament written more than a thousand years beforehand.

[15:47] Imagine for a moment that in 1066 someone had predicted the precise events by which Queen Elizabeth II would come to the throne.

The nature of her rule her character that in 2015 she'd have become the longest reigning British monarch and then her death. Would that not be completely extraordinary back in 1066?

Yet that is precisely what we see in the Bible and it is very very compelling in terms of the birth, life and death of Jesus.

And our verse goes on but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus. Jesus came to earth in history. Richard Dawkins in his book *The God Delusion* says this if God existed and chose to reveal it God himself could noisily and unequivocally clinch the argument in his favour.

Well can we see God has done precisely that in Christ Jesus. He has revealed himself. He has noisily and unequivocally proved himself.

[17:07] What's more there's plenty of evidence that Jesus can give life after death above all because he himself was raised to life after death never to die again to immortality which means that he lives today to give immortality to those who will trust him and follow him.

There's plenty of evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus really died the Roman soldiers made sure of that. The tomb where his body was laid was really empty. Grave robbers would not have left the most precious valuable thing which was the spices.

The Roman authorities or others the religious leaders would not have taken the body because they could have simply produced Jesus' body once the rumours began to circulate of his resurrection thus squashing those rumours immediately.

And as for Jesus' disciples well surely only the resurrection of Jesus explains their complete transformation from fear and disillusionment to the way in which actually they completely turned the world upside down with their message as they preached the message of Jesus over the following years.

So may I say that if you've never really investigated the evidence for the Christian faith the evidence for Jesus Christ and never done so as a grown-up you owe it to yourself to do so.

[18:36] There is good evidence. It's why many churches run that course which Rupert was telling us about earlier *Christianity Explores*. We'd love you to join us in the new year for that.

We won't put you on the spot or ask you difficult questions. Some people like to just come along and sit and listen. Others come along with lots and lots of questions whichever you are that is completely fine. So myth number one Christianity the message of Jesus is irrelevant.

Myth number two there is no evidence. Myth number three it's all about what I do for God.

I guess it's what we naturally think isn't it that every religion is about that it's doing things for God me trying to earn my way with God. I've lost count the number of times I've taken a funeral and a well-meaning relative has said to me he or she always tried to live their best.

At which point you simply know that sadly they are living in cloud cuckoo land and are completely deluded. Which of us would ever say that we have lived our best?

[19:49] It's not true for me I'm sure it's not true for you either. None of us have done our best. And far worse of course they're deluded about God as if what counts before God is doing our best.

Because the Jesus of history tells us that none of us can ever be good enough for God. None of us deserve life with God neither in this world nor the next.

The best can never be good enough for God. Because if we're honest we all of us keep God at arm's length don't we? We run our lives the way we want to run our lives with barely a reference to God.

Some of us I guess we might get married or think about getting married in church. We might come to the occasional carol service but life real life is actually about me and doing what I want to do and achieving what I want to achieve.

And in terms of real life God is irrelevant. what's more Jesus spoke about the judgment warning of the judgment to come more than anyone else in the Bible.

[20:59] Which is why that second word of that sentence this grace the word grace is really something to celebrate.

This grace was given us in Christ Jesus. Grace is one of the most wonderful words in the whole Bible. it is quite the opposite of earning God's favor.

Jesus Christ died on a cross suffering in our place the judgment that we deserve for our rejection of God so that we might be forgiven so that we might receive life with God both in this world and in the next.

Immortality as a gift. You see it's not what I do for God that counts. it's what God has done for us.

You see just imagine that on Christmas day this year you decided to do things slightly differently and you decided that everyone would have to earn their presents and that your mother-in-law would have to run around the block three times to earn hers that dad would have to cook Christmas dinner to earn his and do the washing up afterwards and the children would have to endure 48 hours without their smartphones beforehand in order to earn theirs.

[22 : 21] Well you say that would be a wonderful idea but of course it would be absurd wouldn't it because the whole point about a gift is that it is a gift.

Well none of us deserve God's forgiveness. None of us deserve life with God and immortality. It's why grace is grace because it cannot be earned and it is undeserved. But like any gift it must be personally received. So I want to finish by asking have you done that?

It may be that you've been coming to Grace Church for a while. It may be that you've come to a number of events at Grace Church or carol services perhaps for years. And perhaps actually you know that in your heart of hearts while in the sense you're glad to come and hear that you've never really done anything with what you have heard.

To receive the gift is to trust in Jesus. It is to follow him not as an insurance policy but as God's king. If you've never done that why not ask a Christian you know how they came to do that for themselves or come and talk to me or Rupert afterwards.

[23 : 36] Or take away one of these booklets. We'd love you to take away one of these booklets Christmas in three words. It's a great summary of the Christian message and you'll find it just out through the double doors on the table as you leave.

And to those who have personally received Jesus, why these verses in 2 Timothy, they come in the context of a passage and a Bible book which encourages us to so value Jesus and so prize what he's done for us that we are willing to stand firm publicly for the truth about Jesus at work, at home, with friends, with family.

So I guess it would be good to pray, wouldn't it, this Christmas that we'd do just that, standing truth, standing firm for the public truth about Jesus.