

Carols by candlelight

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] The first reading today is from 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 the light 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, their young shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

The second reading is taken from Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 14. In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be registered.

This was the first registration when Crinius 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. So to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth, as she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, 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 of the Lord said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all of us, 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 to you. And 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.

The third reading today is from Luke chapter 2, verses 25 to 35. Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

[3 : 51] And he came in the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace according to your own word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed. And a sword will pierce your own soul also, so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.

Our fourth reading is from John chapter 1.

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. 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, 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. Lovely to have Sam with us as well. For those who are worrying or wondering, Sam has not just flown here for this evening. He's married to Jane, who is English, and so they're here for three weeks on holiday seeing family. So I hope you have a good rest, Sam, with family. Now, it was described in one of the newspapers this week as possibly the biggest scandal of 2015. Did anyone spot it? Anyone know what I'm talking about?

[7 : 31] Not strictly. No, no. Not everyone, Simon, thinks that's a scandal. But let me give you a clue. Here is the clue. Quality streets. So you may have seen it, but a lady called Charlotte Hook keeps her quality street tins to store her Christmas decorations in. And so a couple of weeks ago, she got them all out of the loft, and she lined them up. And to her absolute horror, she noticed how they had decreased in size significantly over the last five years. And so she turned to the back to read the weights. And here you go. In 2010, there were 1,300 grams of chocolate in one of these. In 2011, 1,000.

In 2013, 820. 2014, 780. And this year, if you look at the back, just 750. 6,000 grams of chocolate in a tin of Quality Street. Yes, you tut-tut with good cause. That is a big reduction, isn't it? From 1,300 grams to 750 grams in just five years. And here is the evidence.

You see, I thought in here there'd be enough to share. But actually, we've eaten them all. There are none left. Not even enough to share. Well, I guess you might say it's an issue of trust, of being certain, of being confident that you are getting what you pay for. And if it's important to be certain of what we're getting when it comes to chocolates and Quality Street, how much more when it comes to the question of that first Christmas and being certain and confident in the events of that first Christmas.

After all, the most recent survey published in November records that 40% of the population of the UK do not believe Jesus Christ was a real figure of history. And so that's why I want us to spend the next few minutes looking at that third reading which we had from Luke's Gospel, from Luke chapter 2. Do turn back to it if you can and if your eyesight permits you to do so.

Now, Luke wrote to a man called Theophilus. He did so so that he could be certain and confident and sure about Jesus. So he is meticulous, for example, about the historical details. He records that the birth of Jesus took place when Caesar Augustus was emperor, when Quirinius was the local governor. In other words, the Christian faith is not about believing the unbelievable, rather it is about examining the facts of history as we have them. And Luke is fascinated, as you read through his Gospel, he is fascinated with real people. Because at the end of the day, Christianity is not an abstract set of ideas, but it is about how you and I, real people, respond to Jesus and his message. And I take it that's why we have this account of Simeon. We meet him as an old man in the temple of Jerusalem. We're told he's been longing for this day, longing for the day when he would see [10 : 59] Jesus Christ face to face. And so on the eighth day after Jesus has been born, when his parents bring him to the temple in Jerusalem to offer thanks to God, Simeon is there and he is rejoicing.

And Luke tells us three things that he wants us to know about Jesus from his response. The first one is this, that Jesus is God's long-awaited king. Have a look at that first sentence there on the screen. Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. Now that word consolation is a strange word to us. It means comfort. Comfort is being proclaimed for God's people, not the sort of hot chocolate, wrap yourself up in a fluffy duvet kind of comfort, but rather 800 years earlier, God had said in the Old Testament through the prophet Isaiah that God himself would come and comfort his people. These are some of the things he said.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Behold, the Lord God comes with might. It is a promise that God himself will come to earth. And so here, 800 years later, in the birth of Jesus Christ, that promise has wonderfully been fulfilled. Indeed, we're told in verse 26 that he is the Christ, the Lord's Christ. That word Christ means God's anointed king or ruler. It describes who Jesus is. There was a letter in one of the papers a while back from a doctor listing some of the surnames of various colleagues he had worked with.

There was a Chinese dentist with the surname Fang, a surgeon with the surname Cutting, and a haematologist called Blood. Surnames which describe very aptly who those people are. Sean the Sheep and Thomas the Tank Engine at a slightly different level play exactly the same game. And when it comes to Jesus, the name Christ is not his surname. Rather, it describes who he is, that he is God's king. He is God's ruler.

It's what we sing about, isn't it, at Christmas? So, hark the herald, angels sing, glory to the newborn king. Jesus Christ was fully human, but he was also fully God. If we had time to read through Luke's gospel this evening, we'd see his account of Jesus' life demonstrates precisely that. He healed the sick, all who came to him, such that the hospital wards would have been empty. He had complete control over evil, complete mastery over nature. With just a word, he calmed a storm. He fed 5,000 people with just a few loads of bread and a couple of fish. Extraordinary. He raised the dead with just a word.

[14:40] See, I wonder who our most influential people of 2015 would be. According to Time magazine, they should include Kim Kardashian West, Janet Yellen, Tim Cook, Angela Merkel, and Malala Youssef, and others. But more influential than any of them is Jesus Christ, God's appointed king and ruler, who rose from the dead never to die again.

But as well as being God's king, Jesus is also God's long-promised saviour. Have a look at verses 28 to 32 of that reading in the middle.

Simeon took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, that you are prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of your people, Israel. It's a very unusual baptism, isn't it? Those who are familiar with the Church of England's service of evening prayer, well, you will know these words as the *nunc dimittis*.

There's none of the usual baptism small talk here. Is he like his grandmother? Is he like the grandfather? Is he like mum and dad? All those kinds of things. Instead, Simeon takes this baby in his arms and he says, verse 29, Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace. He says, I'm now ready to die. Is that not an extraordinary thing to say at a baptism? Why? Well, because God had promised that when he came to his people, he would come to save and he would come to rescue.

It's why Simeon says, my eyes have now seen your salvation. Now, I take it we all know what it means to save something. Whether it's Chelsea Football Club trying to save themselves by sacking their manager and trying to appoint someone else, or whether it's the police and firemen trying to save people stranded by floods in the Lake District. But you say, what is it that we need to be saved from? Well, notice, will you, that Simeon is no longer afraid of death. Verse 29, Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace. You see, he knows that the very next thing that happens after death is the judgment. And he is now confident that he is ready for that, ready to stand in the very presence of God. Now, that is something we all need, because none of us are by nature ready to stand in the presence of God on that day. All of us by nature turn away from

[17:39] God. We may still believe in him, we may still go to church, we may call ourselves Christians, but in terms of day-to-day life, in terms of day-to-day real life, then we are the ones who decide what is right and what is wrong, what our priorities are going to be, what is good, what is bad, our goals and ambitions and so on. Doesn't that describe your life? It certainly described mine before I've heard the message of Jesus. It is a very ordinary life, a very unremarkable life, but I was very much living my way rather than God's way. It is saying, I will not have God to be God over me, and God will grant us that wish, both in this life and the next. And that is why it is so wonderful, you see, that Jesus came as a Savior. It's why Simeon rejoices. Again, it's what we sing about, isn't it, at Christmas, it's what we sing about in Christmas carols, in the words of Silent Night that we just sung. Christ the Savior is born. Jesus, when he grew up, he died in our place, taking the punishment for our rejection of him that we deserve, that all who trust in him might be forgiven and

right with God, both in this life and in the next. It's why you see Simeon is now ready to die, because he has seen the Savior. He knows he can now stand before God forgiven and at peace. A friend of ours died earlier this year, back in the autumn. He was in his late 40s. He had three young children, and he had begun to follow Jesus

Christ as a teenager. And as he laid die of cancer, the thing he said to his wife and family was simply this, Jesus is everything. Jesus is everything. Like Simeon, you see, ready to die, forgiven, and right with God. And there is no more important thing than that.

Jesus is God's long-awaited king. Jesus is God's long-promised Savior. But then thirdly and finally, notice, will you, in verses 33 to 35, the division that Jesus causes.

And again, these are extraordinary words, surprising words for a baptism. They don't fit with a sort of gentle Jesus, meek and mild view of Jesus that we can so easily pick up. Have a look at verse 34.

Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed, and a sword will pierce through your own soul also, so that the thoughts from many hearts may be revealed. It highlights, you see, how people responded to Jesus. It begs the question, how will we respond to Jesus? He caused many to fall, the religious people who came to Jesus, who thought they knew better than he did. The rich ruler for whom the personal cost of following Jesus was sadly too great, and so who declined to do so. Others who were offended by the claims that Jesus made.

[21 : 08] But Jesus was also the cause of many others to rise. A tax collector who realized he was far from God. A woman who had had five husbands who was now on her sixth man. And she too realized what a wonderful thing it was to embrace the forgiveness and new life with God that Jesus offers. And I take it that spectrum of responses is reflected today as well, and in Dulwich as well, that spectrum of responses to Jesus. It's why Luke says at the end of that reading, the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed by Jesus.

Because can we begin to see that actually it's the way we respond to Jesus Christ that reveals our hearts. It reveals how we respond to God. I was talking to a man a while ago who I think would regard himself as a Christian. He was decent, upright, moral, delightful in so many ways.

Someone who thought clearly that he was on God's side. But sadly there was no interest in Jesus Christ or the teaching of Jesus Christ. And so his heart was revealed.

You see, it's very easy, I think, for us to be deceived on this. But for all of us, it's our response to Jesus that shows our attitude to God. Jesus is God's long-awaited king. He is God's long-promised savior.

But he is also the cause of great division. He was when he was born. That has always been the case all the way through history. Indeed, on the final judgment day, he will be the cause of division. Because it's only those who trust in Jesus in this life who will be right with God on that final day. It's very counter-cultural, isn't it? See, our culture loves to speak about inclusiveness. And wonderfully, the Christian faith is very inclusive. It is all-inclusive.

[23 : 15] The message of Jesus is open to anyone, regardless of creed, faith, culture, background. Absolutely anyone. But that doesn't mean everyone is automatically forgiven and right with God.

Because there is a clear division in terms of how people respond to his claims. So I just want to finish this afternoon, if I may, by addressing the two groups of people who, I take it, will be here.

Firstly, there will be those who have not yet personally put their trust in Jesus. And may I say, this may be completely new to you, in which case we are absolutely delighted that you are here.

And we'd love for you to investigate further the claims of Jesus. We're running a course in the new year. You'll see details of it there on the tear-off slip inside the Order of Service. It's a course called Christianity Explored. It's run by churches up and down the country. It's a fantastic course. We're running it for three consecutive Sunday mornings, beginning on Sunday the 10th of January in conjunction with our main morning service. We'd love you to come and give it a go.

Or just come for the first week and see if it's your kind of thing. And perhaps especially if you've come to a carol service before, but you've never really done anything about it. I've spoken to a number of people over the last few days or so who actually I think they've been very honest and said that their perceptions about Christianity and the claims of Jesus Christ really haven't changed very much since they were sort of early teenagers, you know, 13, 14, 15, that kind of thing. And that they'd never really investigated the Christian faith and done so as a consenting adult, so to speak.

Well, if that is you, we'd love you to sign up for this Christianity Explored course, fill the form in, and stick it in the red box, which you'll find in the welcome table on the back there. I don't know about you, but I can think of a whole range of areas of my life where if my assumptions were still based on what I knew as a 13 or 14 year old, then I'd be in trouble. So let me encourage you to think about that. But then for others, I guess there'll be a good number here who, well, we have put our trust in Jesus. Well, well, in that case, you think about how you can ensure that this Christmas is a Jesus centered Christmas. There are lots of fantastic things, aren't there, about Christmas. But above all, let's think about how we can make Christmas a Jesus centered Christmas in which you rejoice that Jesus is indeed God's King, that he is indeed God's Savior. And perhaps too, in which you consider that as you face hostility, as some of us will, for following Jesus, and perhaps increasingly as our culture becomes more and more secular, that actually that has always been the way.

[26 : 18] Because Jesus has always been a cause of division, right through from when he was born, all the way through to today.