

Morning carol service

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Date: 11 December 2016

Preacher: Rupert Evans

[0 : 00] 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. 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 the 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.

[1 : 13] 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. 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.

And I think you find it helpful if you've shut the little service booklets to open them up again, and at that reading that we've just had that Andrew read for us in his very fetching Christmas jumper a few moments ago, from John's Gospel, Chapter 1.

[2 : 39] And I want us just to spend a few minutes thinking about a few verses from that famous Christmas reading. So if you just have a look, right in the middle of that reading, at verses 10 to 13, and I'm going to read those verses to us again, and then lead us in prayer.

So John, Chapter 1, Verse 10. 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.

Let's pray. We thank you so much, our Heavenly Father, for this time of year and for all the things that we can enjoy.

And yet we pray that amidst all the celebration, you would help us to remember what Christmas is all about. Amen. Well, I wonder what your favorite Christmas song is.

[3 : 46] Not the beautiful carols that we've been singing this morning, but those cheesy Christmas classics that seem to get played in every shop and on every radio station at this time of year. I have to confess that while some people loathe them, I'm an unashamed fan of the classic Christmas tune.

Bing Crosby, Slade, Band-Aid and the Pogues feature prominently in polls about people's favorite Christmas songs. But one recent survey commissioned by Rolling Stone magazine listed John Lennon and Yoko Ono's Christmas hit as their top Christmas song of all time.

We're probably all familiar with it, but we may not know that the title of the song, rather surprisingly, is Happy Christmas, War Is Over. The song was released in 1971 and its lyrics are very poignant, dripping with sarcasm.

A very merry Christmas and a happy new year. Let's hope it's a good one without any fear. And so this is Christmas, for weak and for strong, for rich and the poor ones.

The world is so wrong. The world is so wrong. It's not a very Christmassy sentiment, is it?
[5 : 05] But John Lennon's title, Happy Christmas, War Is Over, was designed to be an ironic comment on the world he saw around him, embroiled as it was at the time in the Vietnam War.

While people were sentimentally saying, Happy Christmas, Lennon knew the reality of the world was far different. A world that, in his words, was so wrong.

A world afflicted by war and wickedness. Now that was over 40 years ago. But if we're honest, little has changed since.

War may now be in Syria rather than Vietnam. The big enemy of the West may be Islamic State rather than communism. But our world is still so wrong, isn't it?

Last night's events in Turkey demonstrate that, I guess. And I suppose one of the reasons we love Christmas is because it gives us a glimpse of what the world could be.

[6 : 07] It brings to mind happy memories from the past, perhaps. It brings families together. It is so often a time of joy and laughter. And yet we only need to turn on the news to know that the end of war of which Lennon dreamed is as far away as ever.

Christmas may feel like the most wonderful time of the year, as another song puts it. But we don't have to look far beyond the facade of happy families and cheesy music to know that loneliness and conflict lurk around every corner.

For many, Christmas itself is, of course, a time of sadness marred by family tensions or grief over loved ones who are no longer with us. So I guess John Lennon captured something of the profound mismatch that we feel at Christmas between great excitement and joy on the one hand and the reality of life in our broken world on the other.

And yet 2,000 years before Lennon penned his Christmas song, another writer called John also wrote The Mixed Emotions of Christmas. I guess those words we read a few minutes ago from John's Gospel will be very familiar to many of us from carol services.

And they too capture the bitter sweetness of Christmas time. As John describes the world Jesus encountered when he was born on that first Christmas day. You see, far from the Bible's description of Christmas being the, if we're honest, sentimental and sanitized one of nativity plays and children's crib scenes.

[7 : 47] We find the Apostle John describing Christmas in the same contradictory way as John Lennon. And I think his words help us understand why our world is so wrong.

Let me read those verses again. Just have a look down with me, beginning at verse 10. Speaking about Jesus, he writes, 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 received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Now one of the things that I love about Christmas is surprises. I'm one of those people who'd much rather have a surprise as a Christmas present than ask for something specific. Christmas is a time of surprises.

And I want us to notice three brief surprises about Christmas from these verses in the Bible, which together help us understand why even the first Christmas was one of mixed emotions.

[8 : 52] Here's the first. Jesus is far greater than just a baby. Jesus is far greater than just a baby. At Christmas, I guess, we tend to think of Jesus as just a sweet little baby in a manger.

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head. But the danger of this gentle Jesus, meek and mild view of Jesus is we think Jesus isn't really very important.

Nothing more than a nice story to enjoy at Christmas time, but with no more relevance to my life than Frosty the Snowman or Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. But notice what John says about Jesus in verse 10.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. Most biographies begin with the birth of their subject, but John's biography of Jesus actually starts by taking us back millions of years to the beginning of the universe and makes the staggering claim that as God's Son, Jesus has always existed and that he even made the world.

We sung about that in the second verse of O Come All Ye Faithful, didn't we? God of God, Light of Light, Very God, Begotten, Not Created. So Jesus is far greater than just a baby, John says.

[10 : 23] I guess those wise men got it right when they bowed down before him and offered him gifts fit for a king. I wonder if, like me, when you were little, you used to sneak up to the Christmas

tree when no one was looking on Christmas Eve and have a look at the tags on the presents underneath to see which of them belonged to you.

I'm sure we've all done it. Some of us probably still do it. Well, if we had a tag attached to us, the Bible's claim is it would actually say Jesus Christ on it because we belong to him.

He made us. And just as we'd, I guess, be outraged if our brother or sister tried to open a present with our name on it. So it's quite wrong when we live as if our lives simply belong to us and leave Jesus out of the picture, the one who gives us so many of the things that we, of course, enjoy at this time of year, food and fun, friendships and families.

And yet, if we're honest, that's precisely what we so often do, isn't it? Which leads us on to the second, perhaps uncomfortable, surprise in our verses. Jesus is far greater than just a baby.

But secondly, notice, we don't want to know Jesus. We don't want to know Jesus. Have a look with me at verse 10 again. Though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

[11:53] He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. The whole world belongs to Jesus. And yet, we fail to recognize him as our maker or receive him as our master.

In fact, we choose not to know him. Even his own people didn't accept him, John says. At his birth, they offered him no hospitality at the inn. During his life, they poured scorn on him.

At his death, they murdered him. And what was true for those people then, John actually says, is true of us all.

The shocking claim of these Christmas verses is we don't actually want to know Jesus. Sure, we're quite comfortable with Jesus when we can reduce him to a sweet baby in a manger.

But just as Herod saw him as a threat to his kingly rule, isn't it the case that we're perhaps nervous the real Jesus will threaten our self-rule people? I wonder if you've come across the Christmas craze, the elf on the shelf in recent years.

[13:01] It's a book that comes with a little toy elf and was so popular that John Lewis ran out of stock last year. Basically, the elf on the shelf is an elf who sits on a shelf, as the name suggests, in your house throughout the year and watches everything you do.

And he then reports back to Santa before Christmas to tell him whether you've been good enough to deserve any presents. It's basically a cunning ploy for parents to encourage their children to behave at home or Santa won't pay them a visit at Christmas.

But it's received a mixed reaction. One woman describes the toy like this in her Amazon review. Horrible, passive-aggressive doll that watches you then tells on you to Santa.

My four-year-old cried and didn't want it in the house. Now, we may laugh, but actually, the truth is that none of us would like it if someone was watching us all the time and reporting back on us.

No wonder the four-year-old didn't want the elf in her house. And yet, the truth is that God is watching us. He sees everything we do, everything we say, everything we think, even.

[14:13] He sees that we're not always good, that we don't deserve his presence, his blessings, and we hate it. And so, we choose not to recognize him, not to receive him.

Like that four-year-old wanting the elf out of her house, we kind of prefer Jesus out of our lives. The story is told of two grumpy gnomes who would be hung on a Christmas tree each year as decorations.

One Christmas time, they got chatting. It's not much of a life, is it? One of them complained. I mean, for 11 months of the year, we're stored away in a box in the attic, ignored by everyone until Christmas time, when for a few weeks we get some attention.

They moaned about why an angel got to be at the top of the tree instead of them, and about the presents underneath the tree. None for them, of course. And then they noticed below them a curious nativity scene, a little baby with his parents and some animals and other figures that look like shepherds and kings.

They observed the attention the baby Jesus was getting from the family and were jealous. So one of the gnomes turned to the other and said, look at that baby. Why is he getting so much attention?

[15:27] When he's older, I bet he won't be forgotten for most of the year and only remembered at Christmas time. The other gnome agreed. Yes, and when he grows up, I bet he won't be hung up on a tree for everyone to stare at with pine needles pricking into him.

But of course, that's exactly what happened to the baby Jesus when he grew up. Like those gnomes, he's ignored by many people for most of the year. We fail to recognize him as our maker and our master.

It's actually the reason the Bible gives why the world is so wrong. Because we all choose to live for ourselves rather than under Jesus' good and loving rule. And of course, Jesus was hung on a tree with a crown of thorns pricking his head and nails piercing his hands and feet, an object of mockery for those who stared at him as he hung on a cross.

And that brings us on to the final surprise in our verses. Jesus is far greater than just a baby. We don't want to know Jesus. But finally, and here's the good news, the war can be over.

The war can be over. You see, while John Lennon correctly identified a world that was so wrong, there was one thing he didn't get right. When he chose those words, Happy Christmas, War is Over, as the title for his song, he meant them sarcastically.

[16:57] From his perspective, the sentimentality of Christmas was a sham in a world of war. And yet the Bible can say, Happy Christmas, War is Over, with a straight face.

Because the message of Christmas is that the war is over. It can be over. Not Vietnam or Syria. Peace will always be elusive in this world.

But the greater war we humans wage against our maker, that war can be over precisely because of Christmas. Remember the words of the angels to the shepherds to announce Jesus' birth.

Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to those on whom his favor rests. Jesus entered our world that first Christmas for that very reason, to bring peace between God and men.

We don't deserve that peace. We actually deserve God's punishment, the Bible says, because we don't recognize him as our maker. But that's why Jesus was hung on a tree, on a cross.

[18:06] He died in our place to rescue us, to bring us peace. Christmas TV adverts have become a big thing in recent years.

And the top British Christmas ad this year, according to the number of views on YouTube at least, is the Sainsbury's ad. You've probably seen it. It's an animation featuring James Corden singing a song called The Greatest Gift.

He pretends to be a chap called Dave, struggling to find the greatest gifts he can for his family. And the catchy punchline in conclusion of the song is the greatest gift that I can give is me.

Now while we may understand and like the sentiment, I'm not quite sure how well it would go down at home. If I came downstairs on Christmas morning and announced to my wife and three children that I got them the perfect Christmas present, I think any initial excitement would disappear and they'd be a little underwhelmed when they discovered the reason why there wasn't anything wrapped up for them was because I decided I was a sufficient present for them.

And yet when it came to the first Christmas, it really is the case that God could say the greatest gift is me as he entered our world as a human being.

[19:20] You see, God did give himself to us that first Christmas in the person of Jesus and then gave himself for us the first Easter as he died on a cross to bring us peace.

It's God's greatest gift to us. The reason for Christmas if we were to read on in John's Gospel. This last week saw the anniversary of the tragic death of John Lennon, cruelly killed in 1980 at a young age, less than a decade after his Christmas hit was released.

Jesus Christ was also cruelly killed at a young age. But his death was no tragedy. Because just as a few weeks ago on Remembrance Day we remembered those First World War soldiers who sacrificed their lives to give us peace.

So on Christmas Day we remembered Jesus entered our world to make peace with God possible by sacrificing his life to take the penalty for our sin for the way we so often do shut God out of our lives.

Many Remembrance Day events this year focused on the 100th anniversary of the Somme, perhaps the most notorious and costly battle of the First World War. But two Christmases ago was the 100th anniversary of the famous Christmas Day truce in 1914 when in the midst of the First World War German and British soldiers laid down their arms on Christmas Day famously playing football and singing carols together.

[20:50] It's remarkable to think that such bitter enemies were willing to make peace. But that peace lasted only a day. The peace Jesus came into the world to bring that first Christmas was a far greater peace because it brought a permanent truce to the greatest war, the war we wage against God.

And like a Christmas present, all we need to do to know that peace and to enjoy God's forgiveness is simply to receive it. Let me read verse 12 again for us before we close.

Have a look. Verse 12. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

So I guess the question for us is have we received that free gift? Striking how John says we don't obtain that gift. If you just look onto verse 13, it's not by natural descent, by being British or born into a church going family perhaps, nor is it by human decision or a husband's will.

It's not by trying hard to be a good person. We saw earlier that that's not a charade that we can keep up if God is watching us all the time. No, peace with God comes as a free gift.

[22 : 11] And gifts just have to be received, accepted, don't they? And yet, of course, not all Christmas presents are accepted. eBay even have a page called Unwanted Christmas Gifts Set Up Ready for Boxing Day, where people can auction off the on average two unwanted presents they receive.

So can I urge us not to ignore this present as we might another pair of Great Aunt Mabel's knitted socks this Christmas. Why not make 2016 the Christmas when we think seriously about Jesus, not just as a baby, but Jesus the grown-up?

We'd love to encourage you to sign up for our Christianity Explored group that starts in the new year, a little, very informal course which many have found hugely helpful for thinking afresh about Jesus.

Well, why not take away a copy of Luke's Gospel, one of the other accounts of Jesus' life, or this book called Christmas Playlist, which has even got a commendation on the back by Alice Cooper, the singer, which certainly makes me want to know what's in there, both of which are free to take from the table as you go through the double doors.

And we'd love to encourage you to consider a guided read-through of one of the Gospels with someone here at Grace Church, and do tick the relevant box on the little tear-off slip in the service sheets if you'd like more information about that.

[23 : 33] But whatever we do, let's make sure Jesus isn't an unwanted Christmas present this Christmas. That first Christmas, God gave himself as his greatest gift to us.

And if we receive that gift, we really can say, happy Christmas, war is over.