

Carol Service: Christmas is about the birth of a saviour, Christmas is about a great reversal

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[0 : 00] Now, we went to watch the second Paddington film a couple of weeks ago as a family, and if you've seen it, I wonder if you were surprised to discover that this time round, the star of the show is not the well-mannered, marmalade-loving bear from Peru, but rather Hugh Grant.

I was very surprised. He plays the villain of the film, Phoenix Buchanan. In fact, one of the reviews I read afterwards described him as outrageously scene-stealing and completely upstaging Paddington Bear.

Well, I guess we might well say the same thing about Christmas, that Jesus Christ so easily gets upstaged by the food, the festivities, by family arrivals, friends, holidays, television, all good things in themselves, of course, but nonetheless upstaged.

So what I want us to do, if we may, over the next few minutes or so, is to think about that reading from Luke's Gospel, the second reading we have. We've had it printed there on the service outline to make it easy to follow.

Luke tells us at the very beginning of his Gospel that he is writing so that we can have certainty and confidence about Jesus, that he's gathered information together from the reliable eyewitness documents, that he's writing a carefully ordered account that we can have confidence in.

[1 : 30] So let's dive in and look at this reading from Luke chapter 1, verses 46 to 55. We might say, actually, it's the first Christmas carol ever sung.

It's sung by Mary, the mother of Jesus. It's a carol that is read in many Church of England churches every Sunday. It will be known to some of us as the Magnificat.

And I think we're going to notice there's none of the usual kind of baby talk about pushchairs and antenatal classes and prams and all that kind of thing. Instead, it gets to the very heart of Christmas.

And I just want us to notice two things which I think leap out of Mary's carol. The first is that Christmas is about the birth of a saviour.

Christmas is about the birth of a saviour. Now, Mary has already been told that her son will be God's long-promised king, the one who will rule forever.

[2 : 31] It's just what the prophet Isaiah said 700 years before the birth of Jesus. It's why we heard it in our first reading this morning from Isaiah chapter 11.

And now here we see not only will he be a ruler, he will also be a saviour. Did you notice how Mary starts? My soul magnifies the Lord.

My spirit rejoices in God, my saviour. And then in the second paragraph, she speaks of God's mercy. His mercy is for those who fear him.

And then towards the end of the third paragraph, again, she speaks of God's mercy. When you say, why do we need God's mercy? Well, because we don't naturally magnify God.

When you say, what does that mean? After all, we can't make God bigger than he actually is. But of course, what we so often do is we make him smaller in our mind's eye than he actually is.

[3 : 42] We, if you like, turn the telescope the wrong way around. So that having a big view of God and grasping God for who he really is, we turn the telescope the wrong way around, and we end up with a small view of God.

Isn't that what you and I naturally do? Such that the God who rules the galaxies becomes too small for us to trust and serve and revere and praise and honour.

And at the same time, of course, we magnify people. We big up people. Human cleverness, greatness and achievements.

It's what our celebrity culture, our selfie culture does all the time. In other words, you and I live in a world that is bent on constructing human greatness and deconstructing God.

Which is, of course, to turn the truth that God is God completely on its head. And Christmas won't make sense to us until we realise this great truth that Mary recognises, that we need a saviour.

[4 : 59] We need a rescuer. The story is told of three people who get into a lift in a hotel just a few weeks before Christmas, and they each notice that a £50 note has been dropped accidentally by someone else on the floor of the lift.

One of the three is an honest politician. The other is a generous banker. And the third is Father Christmas. Which of the three picks up the £50 note and takes it along to the receptionist in the hotel?

Well, Father Christmas, of course, because the other two don't exist. But it's not just the politicians and the bankers, is it?

None of us live the kind of lives that we should. We all know that. We don't live the kind of lives that we should live before God. It's what the Bible calls sin.

As we push God to the very edge of our lives, for all intents and purposes, in terms of the way in which we live our lives and the way in which our lives pan out day by day.

[6 : 12] In the words of the Nobel Prize winner, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, The line separating good and evil passes not through nations, nor between classes, nor between political parties, but right through every human heart and through all human hearts.

That describes my heart, and I'm sure it describes your heart. Which means, of course, that none of us can stand before God with a clear conscience.

And yet, wonderfully, as we read on in Luke's Gospel, we see that the very reason Jesus Christ was born was to be a saviour.

And not for the kind of people who think they're good enough for God already, but for the people instead who know they are not. Jesus Christ died on a cross that first Good Friday, bearing in himself the penalty for our sin.

Bearing in himself the judgment of God that we rightly deserve. So that we might be forgiven. So that we might stand before God, forgiven, on the final judgment day.

[7 : 34] I wonder if you caught the headline back in November that a painting by Leonardo da Vinci had become the most expensive piece of artwork ever sold at auction. It was sold in New York for \$450 million.

The painting is called Salvatore Mundi, the saviour of the world. But as one newspaper columnist had the wit to write the following day, the forgiveness of sins that Jesus Christ brings does not cost \$450 million.

Yes, it's very costly. It costs Jesus Christ his life. But it is a forgiveness that is free to receive.

Notice, really, that is completely the opposite, I think, of what our culture assumes Christianity is about. That it's a system of merit, earning our way to God.

Just like the rest of life, really, whether it's the workplace or school, with its constant system of appraisals and reports. But no, this isn't about earning merit with God, earning our way with God, but instead receiving a gift, the gift of forgiveness.

[8 : 51] It is no wonder, is it, that Mary sings this song of joy. Just like so many of our carol services.

They are joyful. The carols we sing are joyful. So, hark the herald angels sing. Glory to the newborn king. Peace on earth and mercy mild.

God and sinners reconciled. Joyful. All ye nations rise. O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant. Which means, of course, that to simply rejoice at Christmas in the turkey and the telly and the presents and family and so on and days off work, and to miss the significance of Jesus Christ, is like the one-year-old who sort of opens the carefully and lovingly chosen presents.

And the carefully wrapped and packaged presents. And actually, they soon ditched the presents, and they're far more interested, really, in the packaging and the wrapping paper. Now, Christmas is about the birth of a saviour.

[10 : 05] But secondly, and the second thing which just leaps out of this carol of Mary's, is that Christmas is about a great reversal. A great reversal.

Have a look, will you, at the second paragraph. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. To fear God simply means to treat God as God.

And this offer of salvation is not just for Mary, but for all people of any age and any generation. So I guess that begs the question, doesn't it, really?

Why do so many people reject the forgiveness that Jesus Christ offers? Why don't more people accept the forgiveness that Jesus Christ offers?

And the reason is very simple. It is human pride. Just see how she continues. I wonder if you have a tame view of Jesus.

[11 : 24] A gentle Jesus, meek and mild view of Jesus. Well, this completely turns that view of Jesus on its head.

Because this is nothing short of a revolution. Far deeper, of far more lasting significance than any other revolution in human history.

A complete reversal of this world's values. Why do people reject Jesus' forgiveness? Because of pride. Proud people don't think they need Jesus to save them.

They think they are okay with God as they are. If you think you're a good person, then you're not going to ask God for his mercy. Because you don't think you need it.

Just as you'll never receive Jesus' forgiveness if you're a mighty person, as Mary puts it. A strong person. A powerful person. Because you will feel strong enough on your own.

[12 : 27] If you think you're big enough to take on the world. If you think that you have the resources to provide within yourself the answer to your problems. Then you won't ask for God's forgiveness.

Because you won't think you need it. Just as the rich, as Mary puts it, will never receive forgiveness and mercy from God. Because they don't want it. And they feel they have everything they need for life already.

A proud, self-sufficient independence from God. Indeed, it's very striking, I think, as we read through Luke's Gospel. And if you haven't done so recently, that would be a great thing to do to pick up one of these copies of Luke's Gospel.

It's very striking, as we read through Luke's Gospel, that it's so often the proud, the powerful, and the rich. With whom Jesus Christ has the greatest conflict.

Now, it's not saying the rich and powerful can't be Christians. But it is saying the proud can't be Christians. And of course, it's our riches and power that are so often the badges of our pride.

[13 : 38] By contrast, the hungry Mary speaks about, why they're not the physically hungry, but the spiritually hungry. Those who recognize that whether they are materially rich or materially poor, nonetheless, they recognize their spiritual poverty, that they have nothing to offer God, and so they accept the forgiveness that Jesus Christ offers.

I wonder if you read about Benedict Allen, the explorer who went missing in Papua New Guinea last month. Eventually, he was rescued by helicopter, but all the time insisting that he hadn't been lost, and he didn't need rescuing.

And there was this wonderful interview with a BBC interviewer, where he completely insisted on this. And the more he said it, the kind of less credible he appears.

He said, I always knew where I was. Things began to go wrong. There were massive storms. A bridge I was meant to cross was swept away, so I slowed down. Then I started to feel the symptoms of malaria.

My mosquito net wasn't functional. My malaria tablets were sodden, so I wasn't able to take the treatments. And then the final straw was, I discovered there was a war ahead, and I couldn't get out.

[14 : 56] And the BBC correspondent clearly was just kind of looking more and more incredulous as this list of problems and catastrophes carried on. And as he insisted, no, he wasn't lost and didn't need to be rescued.

Because, of course, to admit that you do need rescuing actually is a very humbling thing to do. Well, Mary demonstrates that humility.

Jesus himself, a humble saviour, born in a stable, crucified, on a cross, alongside two criminals, and buried in a borrowed grave.

Humility. I guess we need to recognise that we have very counter-cultural this is. And especially in a culture such as ours, whether it's at work or school or wherever we find ourselves, where weakness is so frowned upon and where achievement is everything.

Maybe you're here this morning, and you are a somebody. And that you think before God, you are a somebody. Well, will you humble yourself before him?

[16 : 15] Maybe you're here this morning, and you're a nobody. Maybe. And maybe as you think of yourself before God, you think of yourself also as a nobody.

Well, will you rejoice like Mary did? Now, I guess some of us will know this joy already, the joy of sins forgiven, the joy of peace with God, the joy of knowing God now as our Heavenly Father, the joy of knowing and experiencing these things, yes, in this world, but supremely in the world to come.

And whatever else is going on in your life, and whether you're the kind of person who does enjoy Christmas, or the kind of person who doesn't really enjoy Christmas, well, this is a great thing to celebrate, isn't it?

A great thing to make central over the next couple of weeks in our lives, and to rejoice as Mary does. But I guess there'll be others of us that actually we don't know, and we haven't experienced this joy for ourselves.

And because we've thought about some big things this morning, then we'd love you to investigate further those things that Rupert was mentioning earlier. Can I particularly draw your attention to the Christianity Explore course?

[17 : 32] There are details there on the tear-off slip. You just tear off the slip like that. Tick the box and stick it in the brown box that's there on the welcome table. It's a course which is run by many churches up and down the country.

It is a terrific course, either to begin to investigate the claims of Jesus Christ for the very first time, or perhaps to do it. Many people appreciate the course as a refresher, just to go over the basics again. But we'd love you to do that. I'll be running a course in the new year. Do, by all means, take away a copy of the Gospel and one of the little booklets as well.

But we'd love you to investigate these things for yourself if you haven't really done so as a consenting adult, so to speak. So two big things that leap out of this first carol.

First of all, the birth of Jesus is about the birth of a Saviour. Secondly, the birth of Jesus, Christmas, marks a great reversal.