

Christingle service

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[0 : 00] I just wanted to start off by asking you, when does it start feeling like Christmas? Is it when the shops start filling up with decorations surprisingly early, blaring out their Christmas compilations?

Or how about the now famous launch of the Christmas adverts? These very heartwarming, emotional stories wanting you to believe in the magic of Christmas, even if you have no idea what they're trying to advertise.

Or maybe it was when you received this invitation to come and make this Christmas wreath, and this is the start of Christmas. Maybe you love looking forward to Christmas and want to get ready as early as possible.

You've got all the presents bought and wrapped. Or from looking at some of your faces, you're more like me, who sort of slightly dreads thinking about everything that you need to get ready. For some of you, it may be that this is a difficult time of year. Well, one of the times I think that we can be in no doubt that Christmas is here is if you get to go to a nativity to watch children, grandchildren, godchildren, nieces, nephews, anybody else's children in the nativity.

[1 : 25] So you've got the men, the boys in their dressing gowns with tea towels on their heads as the shepherds. Some very tinsely cute angels.

And then Mary in the ubiquitous blue dress with a white pillowcase on her head, maybe a cushion stuffed up her jumper.

And then suddenly the big reveal of the plastic baby Jesus who's laid in the manger and everybody goes, ah. Well, let's think about Mary.

With the first Christmas, when did she first realise that there was something very special going on? That something so special that 2,000 years later we'd still be talking about it and still be celebrating. When did she stop to get ready? Well, in these Luke's Gospels that you have in front of you, it's an account of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection.

[2 : 31] And we join Mary about nine months before the first ever Christmas on page three. So if you open up. And in this bit of the story, Mary is told something absolutely amazing and utterly extraordinary.

And for what many seem completely unbelievable. She's a young Jewish woman engaged to a respectable Jewish man called Joseph. And an angel comes to visit her.

Not so much cute and tinsely, more awe-inspiring and terrifying. And he has this message for her, which you can find on page three from the little 30, number 30.

She's understandably confused and amazed.

Which you might be too, having just heard that. The angel explains that even though she is still a virgin, this will happen miraculously by the power of God.

[3 : 58] And that the baby will be the son of God. Now we've no doubt heard this story or seen it acted out in Nativity so many times that some of us are probably not that surprised.

Or we've put it into the same category as the nice Christmas children's stories. And Father Christmas, Rudolph, Tiny Tim and those little mice that finished the embroidery for the tailor of Gloucester.

If anybody remembers that story. Humanly speaking, we're meant to hear this account and say, but that's impossible. As I've said, I used to be an obstetrician and gynaecologist.

So I know that virgins do not get pregnant. And angels, well, we see them on cards and the tops of Christmas trees. But people don't generally see living, real, breathing angels that come with a message from God.

Certainly not in your everyday occurrence. It's utterly unprecedented. And that's part of the point.

[5 : 09] This is the announcement that God himself will step down into the world being born as a baby. It can't be your typical run of the mill.

We're pregnant. It seems unbelievable, but there's evidence that it's true. And we learn two things about this baby, the son of God.

He's to be called Jesus and he's going to be king of a never ending kingdom. Now, I'm hopefully getting a puppy after Christmas, which I'm very excited about.

And I'm trying to think about a name because you want something that's really meaningful and that you really love. It's maybe original, unique, imaginative, beautiful.

But you also want something that you're OK shouting at the top of your voice in the park or common without being highly embarrassed. Jesus means God rescues or God saves.

[6 : 16] And he's to have this name because it's a description of why God the son is born as a baby, why he comes to earth, why he lives this perfect life that none of us can live, loving God and loving others perfectly.

And why, aged 33, he dies on a cross, dying a death that actually the Bible says all humans deserve so that we don't have to.

God rescuing people from themselves and from the consequences of ignoring God. As the old Ron Seal advert says, it does exactly what it says on the tin.

Jesus does exactly what his name says. He's God bringing salvation. And that fits with him being this king of a never ending kingdom.

His death wasn't the end of the story. Spoiler alert. Spoiler alert. He rose again. He came back to life. The Romans, when they crucified him, put a sign above his cross, ironically, saying that he was king of the Jews.

[7 : 31] But actually, when Jesus rose to life, he ascended to an eternal heavenly throne where he will reign over everyone, everywhere for all eternity.

And one day the Bible says that all of us will need to give an account of our lives and how we've treated people and how we've treated God before this king, which is why we really need him as a saviour.

But for Mary, let's get back to her. This is all a long way in the future. She hasn't yet had the chance to read the spoilers. She doesn't know that what the angel said would happen does happen.

We can read about it in Luke's gospel. But for Mary, this was an absolutely incredible promise.

Seemingly unbelievable. And so the verse that I'd like you to keep thinking about is also on page three.

It's where there's a little 45. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her.

[8 : 44] When Mary heard the message of the angel, she accepted it. She didn't have all the answers. She didn't know exactly how it was going to work out.

But she believed. And she hurried off to see her relative, Elizabeth, who was also pregnant at the time. And these are the words that Elizabeth says to her.

Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her. There is blessing in believing. I mean, we see belief at Christmas all around us.

They go together. Believe in the magic of Christmas. Believe in the spirit of Christmas. Believe in Christmas just as of itself.

There are calls to believe everywhere. But none with such life-changing, eternal consequences as this. Mary believed and was blessed.

[9 : 48] Blessed to give birth to the Son of God. To care for him when he's growing up. To hear the very words of God spoken to her day by day. And to see what he would do.

And even though she shared with God the Father the unbelievable agony of seeing her son, Jesus, die on the cross. She knew that just as God had fulfilled these promises through the angel of her having given birth to Jesus.

He would still fulfill the promises of raising Jesus from the dead. She was blessed to believe that God always fulfills his promises.

And she's been blessed for eternity to live after death with Jesus in his never-ending kingdom. And there is still blessing now for all who believe.

Blessing to know the forgiveness and rescue that can only come from God. Blessing to be able to know God intimately as our Father. Blessing to know that deep, soul-satisfying joy in him, even

when life is hard and full of disappointments and pain.

[11 : 10] Blessing to know that we can be certain and sure of living in his perfect kingdom for all eternity with him, even after our death.

Blessing to know that he is.

Blessing to know that he is.

Blessing to know that he is. Not in the magic or the spirit. But what happened that first Christmas?

In Jesus, God's son born to be mankind's rescuer.

The baby born to be a king for everyone forever. After we finish, or while you're finishing up the last bits of your wreath, why don't you ask the person who brought you if they believe and why?

[12 : 51] and maybe take these gospels now luke's gospel has got 24 chapters in it and at the start of december the first of december just in case you hadn't worked out is this sunday so maybe you could read a chapter a day as your kind of advent calendar um what happened that first christmas was utterly unprecedented and completely unique no one else has been born to a virgin and no one else has come back to life after three days of being buried but more than just being miraculous what historically happened the bible says has eternal significance for each and every one of us mary was blessed because she believed that the lord would fulfill his promises we've seen even more promises fulfilled so will we know the blessing of believing this christmas