

Carols by Candlelight service

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[0 : 00] My aim in these next 15 minutes or so is simply to look at Jesus' own explanation as to why he came, his own explanation of Christmas.

We've already heard about the events of Christmas, how 700 years beforehand God promised that he would send a king to earth, God himself. Then the announcement to Mary that she'd give birth to a son, the proclamation that this child had been born, all carefully told by the gospel writers, writing careful, reliable, trustworthy accounts.

Just this last week I noticed that Alistair Cook's autobiography is for sale in our local bookshop, or as he now is Sir Alistair Cook. No doubt it will be compulsive reading for many cricket fans over the Christmas period as they read his own interpretation and explanation of the highs and even the lows of English cricket over the last decade or so.

And what we're going to do over the next few minutes or so is to look at Jesus' own explanation, his executive summary, if you like, as to why he came and what he came to do.

And you'll see the one verse from the Bible which is up there on the screen, John chapter 3 verse 16, perhaps the most famous verse of all in the Bible. Let me read it for us.

[1 : 34] For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Notice we need two things. Firstly, God loved the world. At which point, I guess, we used to think to ourselves, well, there's not much very surprising about that.

It's the kind of thing, isn't it, we expect to hear in church. So let me ask, do you think of the world as a lovely place or an unlovely place?

Not so much the world in its natural beauty, but the world's people. A world where the leaders of NATO, who are meant to be allies, barely have a kind thing to say about each other.

A world where a royal prince is caught in a whole process of cover-up and manipulation and abuse and worse. In which the issue of climate change is now so bad, it's a climate emergency.

[2 : 41] In which youth crime and stabbings increase. In which minorities the world over get trampled on by majorities. As we digest media, do we think of the world as being a lovely place or an unlovely place?

And of course, it's not simply out there, is it? It's also in here. Just think of the work Christmas party. Someone I was speaking to, a friend of mine a couple of weeks ago, who has responsibility for these things in his firm, told me he'd be tempted to cancel it this year.

Simply because of all the problems which it causes. Not, I think, because he's a scrooge, but simply because he's being realistic about human nature.

Or perhaps in our own lives, we think of the family feuds or the nightmare boss or the aggressive colleagues or the bully at school. The world is not how we'd like it to be.

Our lives are not how our lives, how we'd like our lives to be. And my life is not how I would like my life to be either. And so you see, it is actually a remarkable thing that we read, God so loved the world.

[4 : 08] Because the problem with our world is not primarily about how we've treated each other, but how we've treated God. In that reading which we just had from John's Gospel, we're told that Jesus came into the world.

And what did we hear? Here the world was made through him, here is the creator coming into our world. Yet the world did not know him. And if we were to read on a few sentences in John chapter 3, Jesus says, the light has come into the world, speaking of himself, and people love the darkness rather than the light.

In other words, by nature, we don't want to know God. And by nature, we hide from God. Now I imagine most of us, if we are honest with ourselves, know that. We may not have said it, but I guess it's fair to say we have lived it. We may be a good person or a bad person. We may be a nice person or an unpleasant person. And yet all of us live our own way without God. It's the Bible's explanation of the way our world is. And why the world is as it is.

[5 : 24] And the Bible gives it a name. Sin. I guess we think of sin, don't we, as the stuff that gets splashed across the front page of the tabloids.

But sin is very simply turning our backs on God. It's how we naturally are. And therefore, of course, it is a very remarkable thing to read.

For God so loved the world. But even more remarkable is that secondly, God gave his son. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.

Jesus Christ was both fully man and also fully God. Not simply a prophet. Not simply a religious leader. But God himself come to earth in flesh and bones. Just as you and I are flesh and bones. That is the claim that stands at the very heart of the Christian faith. I wasn't brought up in a Christian home myself. Every Christmas there would be a fairly half-hearted discussion at home about whether or not we would go to church on Christmas Day.

[6 : 33] And my mother would always say, absolutely, without fail, if we go to church, we can't get the turkey done on time. And every year, without fail, after this very half-hearted conversation, the turkey always won.

Which is why I'm so grateful for the Christian friend who said to me when I was just beginning to think through the whole question of whether God exists. He said to me, Simon, the key issue is the identity of Jesus Christ.

If he wasn't God, then just add him to the countless other religious leaders throughout history. But if he was God, it changes everything.

That friend was right. For a start, of course, it means that God has made himself known. And so we can know what he is like. Jesus spoke with a kind of authority that people had never heard before. The authority of God himself. He calmed a storm with just a word. The creator completely in charge of his creation. He healed the sick on a scale completely unknown before in humanity.

[7 : 48] He raised the dead because he is the Lord of death and life. Indeed, he himself was raised from the dead, never to die again.

I was very struck. You may have seen it in the paper a few weeks ago. There was an interview with the actor and director, Alan Alda. I guess he's best known for his role in the long-running TV series, MASH.

And he went on to play the US presidential candidate, Arnold Vinnick, in the West Wing. He was being interviewed about his new film, Marriage Story.

And it is a wide-ranging interview in which he was asked about his beliefs. And in the course of that, he simply said this. I haven't come across any evidence for God.

That is a very bold claim, isn't it? Because at Christmas we remember that God has indeed stepped into our world.

[8 : 49] He was seen. He was heard. People touched him, flesh and bones. And the New Testament accounts give us trustworthy eyewitness testimony of those who saw him.

It means, of course, that Jesus Christ is the expert. At home, when there's some technical IT problem, I generally turn to one of our resident experts, otherwise known as a teenager.

And on the whole, they can sort it out. And if they can't sort it out, then I know I'm in trouble. Well, in a far greater way, Jesus Christ is the expert on life and death.

And so notice, will you, in our verse that's up on the screen, notice that he speaks of two destinies. That whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

It's extraordinary as you read through the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life, how much of his teaching is focused not on this life, but instead on the next life.

[9 : 57] Notice he speaks about judgment as a reality. He speaks about perishing, but also he speaks of eternal life. And therefore, it is the most wonderful thing to read, For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Because Jesus didn't simply come to earth to show us what God is like. He came to earth to die. In other words, we mustn't think of Christmas without also thinking of Easter.

Indeed, in this very part of John's Gospel, in John chapter 3, he has just been speaking of his crucifixion and of his being lifted up on a cross. Jesus died to take the penalty for our sin, for our rejection of God.

He bore God's judgment for sin in himself. Which means, of course, that for those who believe him, here is the promise, the wonderful promise of eternal life.

In other words, you see, Christmas is not simply about the birth of God, who is the revealer, but also of God, who is the rescuer.

[11 : 21] That's why people often say that Christianity is a rescue religion. I wonder if you read about the arrangements that the department store Harrods have put in place this year, if you want to go and see Father Christmas.

What's the catch? Well, you can only visit, apparently, if you've spent £2,000 on the Harrods credit card in store. One parent was heard to complain, they've lost the true meaning of Christmas. Whether they spotted the irony in that complaint, who knows? Christianity is not a pay-as-you-go religion.

Unlike every other religion, it's not about earning our way to God. We can't earn our way to God. None of us have lived a life that's good enough to do that.

Which is why it's such brilliant news that Christianity is indeed a rescue religion. It's ten years ago since US Airways Flight 1549 took off from an airport in New York bound for North Carolina.

[12 : 35] Shortly after take-off, the plane was struck by a flock of Canada geese and both engines lost power. The pilot, Chesley Sullenberger, managed to glide the plane down and land it on the Hudson River.

All aboard survived. It was described as the miracle on the Hudson. And you may well have seen the film as I have starring Tom Hanks. Now I wonder what those survivors would say today about that pilot ten years on.

I guess something like he saved my life. Just as there will be countless in eternity saying of the Lord Jesus in a far greater way Jesus saved our life.

Praising him in eternity. God loved the world. God gave his son. Which means of course that we have a choice.

Have a look at the verse again. that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. In other words Jesus says that the way we respond to him determines our future.

[13 : 55] We can believe in him. We can experience life with God now. Life as it's meant to be as a forgiven person and in eternity. Or we can do nothing and we can live without God both in this life now and also in eternity.

Now I guess there will be a whole range of us here this afternoon in this building and you are very welcome indeed. For those who do believe in Jesus Christmas of course is a great time to celebrate and a great time to have Jesus Christ at the very heart of our celebrations.

Perhaps I guess there are others and perhaps you've never really heard before why Jesus came or perhaps you've never really given him much thought and if that is you we'd love you to begin to do so and Jake will make some suggestions in a while as to how he might do that.

But let me finish just by reading how one person not from a religious background at all came to put their trust in Jesus Christ. This is what he wrote.

As the weeks went by I began to realise that I simply hadn't understood what I'd been rejecting. I hadn't seen how central Jesus is.

[15 : 20] Christmas isn't a philosophy but about a person. I'd never grasped the compelling evidence that he really rose from the dead and is alive today.

I hadn't seen how real Christianity differs from religion. It's not about what we do for God but what God has done for us. I'd never understood the significance for us that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins.

I simply hadn't understood what I'd been rejecting. God loved the world. God gave his son. God gave his son.