

Carol service

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] Our fourth reading is from John chapter 1, which you will find printed on your service sheets. 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 that 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 recognise 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.

[2 : 27] Let me add my welcome to John's welcome earlier. It's lovely to have you here this morning at Grace Church. I wonder what your essentials are for Christmas, your Christmas essentials, if you like.

Perhaps there's the turkey, or perhaps something else this year. There are the presents. Yes, of course, you could get them on Amazon, but we're not meant to be using Amazon anymore, but can I be bothered to go to the shops?

There's the tree. Am I going to buy a real tree, or am I just going to get that one down from the loft, the plastic one that we tend to go for? There are the cards, real cards, electronic cards, the whole dilemma of who do you send your cards to?

What about the person who sent you a card two years ago, but not last year? Do you send them? It's all very complicated. And then there's the family. Who to invite?

For how long do you heed the advice of some friends of ours several years ago, who said of having family to stay, they're like fish. They go off after three days.

[3 : 32] Of course, the real essential for Christmas is Jesus Christ. And yet it's so easy to forget that in the middle of everything else.

So my aim in the next few minutes is to get to the heart of Christmas and why Christmas is something worth celebrating. We're going to be looking at that last reading which we had from John's Gospel.

You might like to just turn it over again in the order of service. It's very much a reading that is part of our national heritage. It's read every year at the King's College Chapel Carol Service from Cambridge on Christmas Eve.

It's a reading about certainty. And it shows us, I think, two things. It shows us, firstly, that God needn't be a mystery. And secondly, it shows us that God needn't be a stranger.

God needn't be a mystery and God needn't be a stranger. Firstly, it shows us that God needn't be a mystery. No serious historian doubts the fact that Jesus Christ existed as a real person in history.

[4 : 39] The question is, who was he? Was he just another religious leader, miracle worker, or prophet? Well, Jesus was all of those things.

And yet he was so much more than those things. Just look at that very last verse, verse 18. 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.

Well, he's right, isn't he? No one's ever seen God. Left to our own devices, God is completely unknowable. Here is the claim that Christians have always made.

That it's Jesus who reveals God. Jesus is the one who makes God known. Why do you say, how is that possible? Well, because he is God himself.

Who is Jesus? Have a look at the beginning of that reading. In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God. And the word was God.

[5 : 50] He was with God in the beginning. The word is just another way in which John speaks about Jesus. Jesus existed before creation, was with God before creation, was God and yet separate from God.

He goes on. Through him all things were made. Without him was nothing made that has been made. In him was life. And that life was the light of all mankind.

He is the God who created everything. In fact, there's nothing that's been created that wasn't created by him. He is the life giver. It's a glorious reminder that Jesus Christ is God with flesh and bones.

Jesus Christ is God with flesh. Which means, of course, that God needn't be a mystery. We can know what God is like. As John says in that last paragraph, verse 14, 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. Jesus came to earth, a real man.

[6 : 59] We've seen him, says John. We saw him on earth. We listened to his teaching. We touched him. We heard him. The reason, therefore, that you and I have never seen God is not because God is unknowable or that he doesn't exist.

It is just that we weren't around at the right time. If you and I had been alive 2,000 years ago, if we had been living in what today is Israel rather than 21st century Britain, we could have seen him, we could have listened to him, we could have touched him.

The weeks running up to Christmas see a number of unveilings, don't they? There's the unveiling of the winner of Strictly, Kelvin Fletcher and O.T. Mabuse.

See, I'm reliably informed that they really were the most deserving of winners this year. There's the unveiling of Ben Stokes, our sports personality of the year, the unveiling of the winner of The Apprentice, not to mention on Friday evening the unveiling of the Christmas number one.

But, of course, the greatest unveiling at Christmas is the unveiling of God himself as he has stepped onto the stage, if you like, of world history.

[8 : 21] Jesus did the things that we would expect God to do. He demonstrated his authority over sickness, over evil, over nature. He calmed a storm just by speaking.

He created stuff out of nothing. His authority over death demonstrated by raising the dead. He taught with a unique authority.

People said, we've never heard anyone speak like this. He exposed religious hypocrisy and power play. Jesus Christ is God come to earth.

It is, of course, what we sing about, isn't it, in many of our best-loved carols. Once in Royal David's City, with a line, He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all.

O come, all ye faithful, with the words, O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord. As such, of course, Jesus delivers us from what we might call the tyranny of opinion.

[9 : 23] He saves us from the kind of, I like to think that God is like, dot, dot, dot, syndrome. I like to think there are many gods. I like to think there's just one God. I like to think of God as a cuddly teddy bear.

I tend to think of God as a stern head teacher. I think of God as dot, dot, dot. I guess if we went around this room, I guess we'd all have ideas of what God might be like, even if it's that God doesn't exist.

The problem, of course, is how do we know? Is God like the person over here imagines him to be, or is he like the person over here imagines him to be?

At which point, I guess it's very easy to conclude, perhaps, that we simply can't know. Indeed, that it's arrogant to claim that we can know what God is like.

After all, why should my view of God trump anyone else's view of God? Which is why it's such a wonderful breath of fresh air when we come back to the eyewitness accounts of the real Jesus.

[10:29] Jesus is God. It means we can be certain that God exists. It means we can know what he's like. Jesus shows us there's only one God, not a whole pantheon of gods.

Jesus shows us that God is personal. It is possible to know him. He's not an impersonal force.

Jesus shows us that God is indeed the creator, the one with power over all creation.

Jesus shows us God is compassionate, that he's gracious, that he's not vindictive, and yet he is also the judge, the one to whom each one of us is accountable on the final day.

God needn't be a mystery. That in itself is a great thing to celebrate Jesus Christ. God himself has come to earth.

He shows us that God exists. He shows us what God is like. But I said there were two things. The second thing is not only that God needn't be a mystery, but God needn't be a stranger.

[11:35] God needn't be a stranger. All the surveys consistently suggest that something like 70 to 90% of the population of the UK believe in some kind of divine being.

But also that the majority, the vast majority of those, are uncertain about where they personally stand with God.

And if we are representative of the population as a whole, then many of us, I take it, will be just like that. So have a look again at verse 12 in that penultimate paragraph.

Verse 12. Yet to all who did receive him, that's Jesus, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Here is the wonderful promise, the glorious promise that those who believe in Jesus have the right to become children of God. That word right speaks of a certain legal authority in just the same way that if I doubted my own family membership, I could pull out my birth certificate and I would read Simon Mark Christopher Dowdy, born to Michael John Dowdy and Thelma Irene Dowdy.

[12:47] In just the same way, here is the certain legal declaration by God that those who believe in Jesus Christ can be certain now in this world, in this life, that we belong to God's family and certain that on the final day we'll be welcomed into heaven as family members.

God needn't be a stranger to us. Now, of course, we may well say, we may well think, well, surely everyone is a child of God.

But no, read on. Verse 13, children born not of natural descent nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

Notice we don't become part of God's family by what John calls being born of blood. In other words, not just because we're British or because we're born into a church-going family.

Nor do we become part of God's family by what John calls the will of the flesh. The word speaks of human effort. It's not something we can earn by living a decent life or giving to charity or going to church.

[14:00] In short, you see, can you see what he's saying? That none of us are naturally members of God's family. which is why John says of Jesus in verses 10 and 11, 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. Now, that is a really astonishing thing when you think about it because, of course, the person of Jesus is so very, very attractive.

Those closest to him described his life as a life of absolute purity and goodness, a man of the most extraordinary and wonderful compassion.

No one could doubt the fact of his miracles or the authority of his teaching. Yet, despite all of that, our natural response, and I speak for myself as much as anyone, is very much to keep Jesus and to keep God at arm's length.

And the Bible has a word for that, which is simply the word sin. When I was growing up, we had a little crib at home which came out every year for Christmas.

[15:18] Two weeks before Christmas, this thing would be unpacked. The animals and the baby Jesus would all be arranged in the crib. Some fake snow would be kind of sprayed onto the top and some straw would be put inside and all the rest of it.

And then two weeks after Christmas, we'd put it all away again and everything would go back in the box and it would go up in the loft until next year. Isn't that how we treat the real Jesus by nature? We bring him out for a carol service or perhaps for a wedding or a funeral or perhaps when we're fearful for our job or when we could deal with a bit of help in life. And then we just put him away again.

Yes, of course, there are those who, like Richard Dawkins, reject Jesus in a very public manner and antagonistic way. And then I guess the majority of us simply demonstrate our rejection by the lives we lead.

Now, I'm very conscious that is not necessarily something we want to hear. We like to think, don't we, that we are all naturally part of God's family. Whereas Jesus says that actually none of us are naturally speaking.

[16:31] Or to put it another way, let's ask the question, you know, why did Jesus come? In a nutshell, can we say, why did Jesus come? Well, the answer lies in some of the other Christmas readings from the Bible.

What is it the angel says to Joseph? You are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

What is it the angel say to the shepherds? Today in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you. If we were naturally part of God's family, Jesus needn't have come.

We wouldn't need a saviour, but none of us are. And so we need the saviour the angels spoke about. That's why Jesus came.

In other words, you see, you can't think about Christmas without also thinking ahead to Easter. Jesus came to die in our place on a cross, to take the punishment we deserve for our rejection of God, so that those who trust in him might be forgiven, forgiven people, both in this life, forgiven in the next life, and part of God's family.

[17:46] So can we see why the promise of verse 12 is indeed very remarkable and very gracious? Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Again, take it as why Christmas is something to celebrate, because it means that God needn't be a stranger to us. I guess there'll be a whole variety of us here this morning in this room.

I guess there'll be many of us who know already what it means to be part of God's family, and I take it that whatever else Christmas has in store for us over the next few days, whether we're here or whether we're away with friends and relatives, I take it we'll want to make sure that the focus is very firmly on Jesus Christ, and the fact that because he has come, God isn't a mystery and he's not a stranger.

Wonderfully, there'll be some of us, I guess as well, and perhaps we've put our trust in Jesus Christ and begun to follow him in the last 12 months for the very first time, in which case this Christmas, I take it, will be unlike any other Christmas you've had before, a Christmas in which you know God himself, no longer a stranger.

But I guess there'll be others and you don't yet know what it means to be part of God's family, in which case, I'd love you to take the first steps which may lead you to become part of his family, perhaps the first steps of investigating how you might do that, investigating the claims of the Christian faith, and John will make one or two suggestions about that later on.

[19:37] It may of course even be that you'd like to become part of God's family today, in which case, do come and chat to me afterwards or talk to a friend here at Grace Church.

Two reasons to celebrate at Christmas. God needn't be a mystery and God needn't be a stranger. Let me pray. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only God, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed that we can celebrate this time of year the fact that you have made yourself known, that you needn't be a mystery to us.

And we praise you too that Jesus Christ came such that those who trust in him might be part of his family, your family. We thank you too that you needn't be a stranger to us.

[20:45] We needn't be strangers to you. And we pray, Heavenly Father, please would you help us amidst all the celebrations over the next few days to keep our eyes firmly on Jesus Christ.

And we ask it in his name. Amen.