

# Carols by Candlelight

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Preacher: Nigel Styles

[0:00] Well, we're fed up with bad news stories, aren't we? Over this past year, I've been involved in overseeing an office building project that has been massively delayed.

And it's become sort of a metaphor for a bad year. It's been Brexit, Covid, 688 days worth of that litany of numbers newly infected.

The ever-growing tally of deaths. Supply chains, lorry drivers, manufacturing, the weather, the climate change as well.

And what a year we've had. And now there's government sleaze, just to add to that, to party or not to party. That is the number 10 question.

Even the royal family, I mean, they've been under the cosh this year as well, haven't they? Things are bad. It can feel, can't it, like a seeping sludge of bad news that is covering everything.

[1:07] Like the mud that's left over after a flood. No wonder we're all, I don't know, feeling frazzled, aren't we, at the end of the year. Work is harder than usual.

Family is... Enough! Enough, you cry! Give us some good news, will you? I mean, boy, do we need it. Because somehow the nostalgia of Christmas, it just doesn't seem enough this year, does it?

To dream about a white Christmas. To park ourselves in front of the telly for that Boxing Day gloopy movie. A bit drugged up on Quality Street and Brandy Butter.

To ho-ho-ho at the world. Or even to go online on Christmas Day and spend 1.2 billion pounds buying the presents that we didn't receive, that we'd wanted.

I love escapism like the next man, but Disney just doesn't seem to cut it this year. I need some real, some genuine good news.

[2:18] You know the Christmas story, of course. By the way, I haven't got some new angle on it. As a vicar mate of mine said, I've been doing carol services for 10 years now.

It's going to have to be the donkey's perspective this year. You know the Christmas story, of course you do. Believer, sceptic, interested, inquirer, whatever brings you here this evening or causes you to be watching this this evening.

We know that it is supposed to be good news. That's what the angels say, isn't it? Trumpeting it to the shepherds. Behold, I bring you good news, they say.

Great joy for everybody. Yes? Well, unto you is born this day in the city of David a saviour who is Christ the Lord.

Please really let me, this evening, for about 10 minutes or so, try to persuade you that the Christmas story is good news. It really is the good news that we need at the end of 2021.

[3:31] So here's the first thing that the Bible tells us. And that is that this one event in history changes all history.

That phrase, good news, had got a particular meaning back in the first century. We've dug up some ancient inscriptions.

When I say we've dug up, archaeologists have dug up. I wasn't there. Archaeologists have dug up some ancient inscriptions. And it uses exactly that same word carved onto this ancient bit of stone. That word good news or gospel. To say that his birth was like the start of a new era. The kingdom of Augustus.

Peace and salvation for all his people. A new calendar system to mark his birth. So good news means not just my wife's going to have a baby.

[4:42] By the way, given my age, if my wife was going to have a baby, that wouldn't be particularly good news. No, good news meaning a whole new era. And it begins right now.

It's like the way a wedding marks a new era. The confirmed bachelor becomes a married man. Or the first baby and the couple becomes a family.

And everything changes. And that's what the angels say. Something has changed today.

Something really, really big. And it changes not just this one family.

But it changes all history. An entirely new era. But I wonder if you noticed how that Bible reading from Luke.

It starts with a whole load of dates. We're told it's the year of the census. We're told it's the time when Quirinius was governor. Now those things might not mean anything very much to us.

[5:44] But it dates it. A particular event. At a particular moment. And the writer wants that clear. This is history, right? And it's today, say the angels.

A particular day. This day. Something changed. Something happened. Something so big. So momentous. So fantastic.

Something so incredible. You need to know that it really did happen. In history. For real. One event in history.

That changes all history. Actually. Actually. If you grasp the size of this. Then you're beginning to get a handle on the whole Christian claim.

Miracles. Virgin birth. Resurrection. They all flow from the belief that the baby in the manger was the God-man.

[6:44] God in the flesh. God looked at this screwed up golf ball of a planet. In the far reaches of some distant galaxy.

And here. He did something so huge. So universe. Transforming. That it makes sense of everything else in the Bible.

And it changes all of history ever since. That if you like is the what of Christmas. One particular event in history.

That changes all history. Okay. Here's the second thing. That this happened. At one place in the world.

And it changes all the world. And I say that again. Because the location matters here. There was a place. And if you've been in that place.

[7:43] On this particular day. You'd have seen it. There. In the royal city. The place where kings come from. That's where. Not in the capital city.

Not in the palace. Not in the pages of Hello magazine. But a royal place nonetheless. And from there comes this good news for all the world.

And that's trumpeted by the angels as well. This isn't for some particularly impressive people. Some particular opinion formers.

Or particularly religious types. No. Not at all. It's for everyone. And that means for regular guys.

For ordinary people doing their ordinary work. Shepherds. Amazon drivers. Lawyers. NHS workers. Workers.

[8:45] Creatives. People like you today. Making their living. And into their world. Right into the centre of their world. Like a flash of light.

Break something. Momentous. It's so big. That he sent the choir along. To scare the living daylights out of them.

And it happens there and then of course. But it is for everybody. Forever. One place in the world. That changes all the world.

And you do realise what this implies. It implies that God doesn't have favourites. That with God it's not a case of. One system for them.

And another for everybody else. God isn't flattered or bribed or partial. He can't be bought. This is the who of Christmas.

[9:46] It's something. This good news. This start of a whole new era. For everyone. Yes it happens at a particular place in the world.

But it changes all the world. And it's all focused on someone. Thirdly. One tiny baby.

That changes everything. It's all about. Say the shepherds. A saviour. Who is Christ the Lord. A saviour. King.

The crucial significance. Of this cradle. An upcycled. Animal feeding trough. In some. Small town. The significance of it. Is it's place in this. Downward sequence. Of steps. From the comfortableness. Of heaven. To the cruel cross.

[10:44] Of Calvary. You might say. The steps from glory. To gory. And we don't understand. This momentous event.

This Christmas scene. Unless we ask. Where was Jesus going. Down these steps. Where was his journey headed. Or to ask the same question. Another way. What did Jesus do.

When he grew up. The king. That's what the word. Christ means. It's another way of saying. Your majesty. The king. Well.

What did the angels say. What is the good news. This momentous news. About this tiny baby king. Unto you is born. A savior.

They say. Jesus. Lord and king. Of this world. Came. To save it. And that's what he did. When he grew up. I wonder why you think.

[11:43] The world is. So dark. Why is it. Messed up. What's your explanation. For. For pandemic. And pain.

And sadness. Do you think. That all the problems. Are out there. And there's any possibility. That the problems. Could also be in here. There's an old.

Peanuts cartoon. Where. Charlie Brown. Is soliloquizing. Sometimes. I lie awake. At night. He says. And I ask.

Where have I. Gone wrong. And then a voice. Says to me. This is going to take. More than one night. The world is like it is.

Because. People live here. People like us. Who do. Extraordinary acts. Of kindness. Of course. And also. Terrible acts.

[12:42] Of malevolence. Sins. And not just. To one another. But. More significantly. Towards God. Somebody said this to me.

Yesterday. I don't know if you agree with this. See what you think. They said. There are two buildings. That every modern society. Has. The first. Is a prison.

Which tells us. That we mess up. And it is. An uncomfortable truth. But. A true truth. That at Christmas.

God says. You have done wrong. You wronged me. You need a savior. And I'm going to send him. To save you. The second building.

In every society. Is a hospital. And that tells us. That ultimately. We cannot escape. Death. As a vicar.

[13:40] I remember being called. To. To hospital. To. Go to the bedside. Of a dying lady. Who'd asked to see me. She was a. She'd been a church goer. All her life. She was now in her eighties.

I hadn't seen her. For a while. And when I saw her. She was. Emaciated. It was like she'd shrunk. She was about a third. Of the size. That I remembered. Her being.

When I had seen her. She was very obviously. In her last. Days. Probably her last hours. What do you say. To somebody like that. What is a vicar.

Supposed to say. To somebody. Right at the end. Of their life. Well. I did what. The only thing. I could think of doing. I began to explain. To her.

The good news. Of Christianity. That Jesus. Came into the world. King as he is. He came to be. Her savior. So that our sins.

[14:35] Could be forgiven. The sins. That we mean. That we. That mean. That we face God. Hang on. She said. What have I done wrong? Why do I need.

To be forgiven? I thought it was an extraordinary. Thing. That at that moment. So close. To the end of her life.

Clearly. In hospital. To die. At that moment. She was so sure. That she didn't need a savior. And that's exactly why Jesus came.

To rescue us. To save us. From all that makes. Our world. So full of. Bad news. Makes our. Future so dark.

He. He came to bring. Forgiveness. This. One particular. Tiny baby. This baby. Changes everything. Because he's the savior.

[15:32] That we need. And that's why Christmas. Is good news. It really. Is. One particular.

Moment in history. But it changes. All history. One location. In the world. But it is for all the world. One. Tiny baby.

Who changes everything. Because he is the savior. King. And the thing. And the thing that makes this. Different from gloopy. Disney world. Is that it's tied.

To history. To place. To time and place. Real. Time and place. Not. Make believe. This is not the. You can be anything you want to. So long as you believe.

Type. Imagination. Good news. Into our world. That comes. As a baby. Wrapped present. All focused on Jesus.

[16:31] One person. And one massive. And outrageous claim. To be. The king. Savior. That I need. Actually. That a bad. News.

World. Needs. So many people. Visit church. At Christmas. It's a huge. Proportion. Of the UK population.

Singing carols. Hearing about Jesus. A saviour. Who is Christ. The Lord. And then. Carefully. Consigning him. To the Christmas box.

Along with the baubles. And last year's Christmas cards. Thanks for the good news. Now back to my bad news. Where was I? What a.

What a terrible Christmas. If you say that about it. To end a terrible year. With that. When God has acted. To change everything. For us.

[17:27] Forever. I don't know what brings you here tonight. Perhaps you. Think of yourself as a visitor. Maybe some Christian friend.

Invited you. Here. Or maybe you. Are a committed Christian yourself. Here's a question. For you to ask. Maybe the person you came with tonight. The person who invited you. Perhaps if you're watching online.

You could WhatsApp them straight afterwards. And ask them this question. Here's the question. Instead of asking. What are you doing this Christmas? Ask. When was it that Christmas became good news for you?

One moment in history. That changes all history. One place in the world. That changes all the world. One baby. That changes everything. Because he is the saviour.

That we need. Why don't I finish with a short prayer. Let's pray. Lord Jesus.

[18:30] Thank you that you came into this world. To be the saviour. That we need. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much. For your journey.

From the comfortableness. Of heaven. All the way to the cross. Where you would die. To buy forgiveness for us. Thank you for extraordinarily good news.

For a world that so desperately needs it. And we pray that this Christmas. This message will be good news.

For every one of us. In Jesus name. Amen.