

(2) The real meaning of Christmas (Carol Service)

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] The first reading is Isaiah chapter 9 verses 2 to 7. The first reading is Isaiah chapter 9 verses 3 to 7.

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[2 : 59] The angel said to them, But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart, and the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them.

John chapter 1 verses 1 to 18. There was a man sent from God whose name was John.

He came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him. He was not the light but he came to bear witness about the light.

The true light which enlightened everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world and the world was made through him yet the world did not know him.

He came to his own and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor the will of man but of God.

[5 : 35] And the word became flesh and dwelt amongst us and we have seen his glory. Glory as of the only son from the father full of grace and truth.

John bore witness about this and cried out this was he of whom I said. He who comes after me ranks before me because he was before me.

And from the fullness we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God, the only God, who is at the father's side. He has made him known. For many of us Christmas I imagine is a fairly familiar routine.

The same decorations come out year after year. Those cracked baubles, the tired tinsel. The lights where we spend hours trying to find those spare bulbs which we convinced that we bought last year but just can't quite seem to find them again this year.

[6 : 41] Some of us even eat the same food and watch the same tired television programs. And I guess some of us will be able to write the script for the events of our family Christmas in advance.

Whose fault it is that the turkey isn't quite ready on time. Who it is who will insist in turning the television on at three o'clock to watch the Queen. Which member of the family will be most unappreciative of his stroke her presence.

Who it is with whom you'll finally lose all patience. And at exactly what time in the afternoon you'll lose patience with him or her. I guess it's easy, isn't it, to treat the meaning of Christmas in the same way.

We think we know the script. Yet as our culture drifts further and further away from its Christian moorings, it seems to me all the more important that we keep coming back to the very heart of what Christmas is about.

And so what I want us to do in the next few minutes is to think about those two names that are given to Jesus that we heard about earlier in that reading from Matthew chapter 1, verses 18 to 25.

[7 : 54] It's why we've had that one reading printed on the order of service on the second page there, so we can follow it together. I guess for most of us our names are probably of little significance, except that our parents liked them.

My name, Simon, means listening and obedience. So I can be fairly certain either that my parents were suffering from delusion when they chose that name, or they had no idea, more likely I suspect, what it meant.

But the names Jesus was given, they are full of significance. They explain for us both who Jesus is and also why he came. First of all, Jesus is God with us.

Just have a look with me at that third paragraph in that reading from Matthew chapter 1. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken to the prophets.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us.

[9 : 05] Notice we're told both the name, Emmanuel, and the meaning of the name, God with us. Now, the birth of Jesus is no fairy tale or myth.

These are historical facts that we've been thinking about this morning, events that really happened. If you and I had really been there ourselves, we could have written pretty much the same kind of thing.

So the existence of Jesus isn't in doubt. The issue is his identity. Who was he? Who is he? What does Matthew tell us?

He shall be called Emmanuel, which means God with us. He is God with us in the flesh. Which, of course, is why his birth was so unusual.

A virgin birth, or a virgin conception, should we say. Mary and Joseph were engaged. We heard, didn't we, how embarrassed Joseph was to discover that Mary was pregnant.

[10 : 09] Clearly, a virgin birth is not an everyday occurrence. But God has only come into his world once. And therefore, I guess we'd expect some fairly unusual things to happen, wouldn't we?

If God has come to earth, then by definition, things which are not within our normal sphere of experience might happen. What's more, when Jesus grew up, he claimed to be God, and he did the sorts of things which only God can do.

On one occasion, he calmed a storm, which was terrifying. The most hardened local fishermen. I take it, it takes quite a storm to scare fishermen like that. I take it, you can only calm a storm, and Jesus did it simply by saying to the wind and the waves, be still.

I take it, you can only do something like that if you are the God who made the wind and the waves. The same day, he went to the local hospital.

He raised the little girl back to life. Just imagine going to the mortuary at King's and doing that. You can only do that kind of thing, can't you? If you're the God who has power over life and death.

[11 : 28] Now, I guess we may well say to ourselves, well, I've never seen God. But the point is, if we had been there 2,000 years ago, we would have seen him. God has come to earth.

Which is a great thing to celebrate, isn't it? It's why Christians have so much to celebrate at Christmas. It means we can know God. And therefore, of course, the coming of Jesus into our world is an event of supreme significance for everyone.

You often hear, don't you, people saying that God is unknowable. And it's basically sort of up to each one of us to work out what God is like. I take it that when people say it's arrogant of Christians to say that Jesus is the only way to God, I take it that is their assumption.

That none of us can know what God is like, and therefore, it's supremely arrogant to say that any one religion is right and the others are wrong. But of course, the assumption is wrong because God can be known, not by those who are clever enough to work it out, but by anyone who is willing to consider the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life as we have them in the Gospels in the Bible.

Because God himself has made himself known. But notice that not only has God come and made himself known by coming to earth, but the implication, of course, of that is that we can know what God is like.

[13 : 04] This year's Christmas children's film is The Golden Compass. It was released on December the 5th. Some of us, I guess, may have seen it. It's based on one of the novels by Philip Pullman. And I gather that his kind of message in the books has been airbrushed out, but certainly the books raise the question, if you've read them, of God's character and what God is like.

In an interview with the Sydney Morning Herald some time ago, Philip Pullman said this, my books are about killing God. If he's a God as Christians describe him, he needs to be put down.

It's a tough thing to say, isn't it? Now, I have met Philip Pullman. I'm sure he's a delightful man. But clearly he has not read the accounts of Jesus Christ as we have them in the New Testament.

Because we could never meet a more attractive personality than Jesus Christ. In the words of Bertrand Russell, the philosopher, who concluded, if everyone was like Jesus Christ, this world would be paradise.

So then, Jesus is God with us. I don't know if you watched Sports Personality of the Year last Sunday evening. It was a good evening, I take it, if you were into boxing.

[14 : 24] And especially good evening if you're a fan of Joe Calzaghe, or however it is you pronounce his name. You can tell that I'm not a fan of boxing, and I was left rather cold by the whole affair.

But unlike Sports Personality of the Year, which is of significance only for some people, those who are into boxing especially, why the coming of Jesus is not of significance only for some people, those perhaps who are interested in religion, or interested in first century history.

His coming into the world is of significance, the greatest significance, for everyone. Because this is God himself, the creator and ruler of the world, stepping into his world.

And therefore, I take it all of us need to sit up and take notice. It's not just a nice story for the children. This is the living God intervening in history.

Which wonderfully, of course, means that God does not have to be a stranger to us. I guess in a crowd this size there are about to be one or two, for whom God is a stranger and he feels like a stranger.

[15 : 38] But that needn't be, as those who are Christians here today would testify. So first of all, Jesus is God with us. That's the significance of that first name that Jesus was given.

But of course, that begs the question, well, why did Jesus come? So let's look at that other name because it shows us that Jesus is God's rescuer. Have a look at the passage again and see what the angel says to Joseph at the end of the second paragraph.

Speaking of Mary, the angel says, she will give birth to a son and you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins. Now the name Jesus means the Lord saves.

So notice once again we're shown what the name is, Jesus, but we're also shown the meaning of the name. He will save. He will save people from their sins, as the angel puts it.

In other words, I take it we need to understand both what we mean by sin and also what is meant by saving. Now sin is perhaps one of the most misunderstood words in the English language.

[16 : 51] When the Bible says we're all sinful, it is not simply saying we're all bad people, which I guess is what we tend to think. Sin rather means that we have said no to God being in charge of our lives.

We may still believe in God. We may still say our prayers. But we don't want to treat God as God and we ignore him most of the time.

Now I take it I could be a very nice person and act like that towards God or I could be a dreadful person and act like that towards God. I take it I could be a regular churchgoer and act like that towards God.

I take it I could be a confessed atheist. But whichever, we ignore God as far as day-to-day life is concerned. And that is what the Bible calls sin.

And I imagine if we're honest with ourselves we'll recognise that description in our own hearts. Now I don't know whether you'd class yourself as a party animal.

[17 : 57] If you do you'll have a bumper couple of weeks coming up over Christmas and New Year. But I wonder if you've ever had that experience of being at a party and being ignored. You know the way people sometimes kind of talk through you just to pretend we weren't there that kind of thing.

But isn't that just how we treat God? But I am the one who decides how I'm going to run my life. And God barely gets a look in unless of course we need a helping hand.

Which wouldn't matter that much if God wasn't passionately concerned about the world he has made. But he is. And he tells us that on the final day each of us will have to give an account to him for the way in which we have lived our lives.

And so of course what we need is forgiveness. What we need is to be rescued. It's why it's such a great thing to hear those words of the angel to Joseph.

She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins. And therefore of course while a carol service is a great way to celebrate the birth of Jesus it's also an occasion to celebrate the death of Jesus because the reason Jesus came to earth was to die as a rescuer.

[19 : 29] Now last year we were given a Christmas card which made precisely this point. In the middle of the picture on the front there was the baby Jesus lying sweetly in the manger surrounded by fluffy sheep and all that kind of thing but then daubed in blood along the side of the manger were the three words born to die.

That's why Jesus came. He died taking the punishment that you and I deserve for treating God the way we have treated him. For living our lives as if he wasn't there.

He died so we can be forgiven. So we can be right with God if we should choose to be. It's why Christmas is such good news. It's why there's so much worth celebrating. Not only because God has come into his world but also he's come as a rescuer.

Just think for a moment about how some of the most popular Christmas carols put it. We're about to sing the herald angels sing. What are we going to sing? Mild he lays his glory by born that man no more may die born to raise the sons of earth born to give them second birth.

We started with once in royal David's city what do we sing? Verse 3 and our eyes at last shall see him through his own redeeming love.

[20 : 52] Jesus the redeemer the rescuer. Or think of the words of Silent Night which we haven't sung today but it proclaims Christ the saviour is born.

We sing these carols don't we again and again yet it's so easy to miss the staggering truths that they teach us. If Jesus is God with us and he is God's rescuer there is much to celebrate.

So then how did Joseph respond to what he was told? We'll have a look again at that last paragraph. When Joseph woke from sleep he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

He took his wife but he knew her not until she had given birth to a son and he called his name Jesus. Do you notice how he takes God at his word?

Remember Joseph was pledged to be married to Mary. In that culture if you were engaged you had entered into a legal agreement a binding contract to Mary.

[22 : 04] The only way out of that was to divorce which is why we're told that when Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant he had in mind to divorce her. But notice now he decided to trust God and to take him at his word.

Now I don't imagine that was an easy thing for Joseph to do. He wasn't gullible. Must have been an extraordinary thing for him to hear. But he trusted that what God said was true.

He believed that it was possible for God to intervene in human history. He believed that it was possible for God to work in a woman's womb so that the baby she was carrying would be the very son of God.

God. You see Joseph stands as a model for all of us as to how we should respond to these events and especially as a model for those of us who find it difficult to believe it.

And therefore of course we need to ask ourselves the question well will I like Joseph take God at his word? Will I trust him with my life? Will I accept the offer of forgiveness that he holds out for us?

[23 : 14] Will I accept that Jesus is God in the flesh who has come on a rescue mission to die for me on the cross so that I might be forgiven? Or to put those questions another way around do you know what it means to be forgiven?

Not by other people but by God. Imagine what that would be like. Do you know what it means to feel clean on the inside to know God to be known by God? To have life with God both in this world and also the next.

If you do as many of us do here this morning let's not allow the routine of Christmas to blind us to what we are really celebrating.

Let's make sure that as we gather with friends and family we have a Jesus-centered Christmas. Christmas. But if you don't yet know what it means to be forgiven then please don't let another Christmas simply slip by without getting the matter settled.

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