

Carol Service 2020

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Date: 20 December 2020

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] Now there are of course two versions of Christmas. There's the trivial version which is all about the turkey and the television and presents and all that kind of thing.

And then there's the real version which is much more substantial and significant. And today I want to talk about the real version and in particular I want to speak about death.

Now immediately of course we may well be thinking well hang on a moment that doesn't sound particularly appropriate for a carol service. And yet surely this year of all years demands it. Indeed many people I've spoken to in the last nine months or so recognize that actually one of the blessings in a sense of this COVID season has been that it's made us face up to death. We cannot ignore it and with countless empty chairs around dining tables this Christmas at Christmas lunch many people long for answers.

[1 : 08] Tim Stanley writing in the Daily Telegraph a couple of weeks ago wrote this. We are in the middle of a national crisis and it's a crisis about death.

This should be the church's big moment because the central message of Christianity is that while death is bad it's not the end. Jesus lived.

He died. He rose again. This Christians believe is a historical fact and it's the outrageous claim that converted much of the world to Christ.

And therefore what I want us to do for these next few minutes this afternoon is to speak of confidence in the face of death. As such it actually gets us to the very heart of Christmas. We've heard the events of that first Christmas from those readings from the Bible. And so what I want to do now is to focus on this one sentence which is up on the screen from the New Testament.

[2 : 13] It's one of many summary sentences in the New Testament which give us in a nutshell so to speak why it is that Jesus came. Let me read it to us.

It speaks of God's own purpose which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

It shows I think there are two things to celebrate at Christmas which COVID helps us to appreciate more than ever. Firstly, the birth of a Saviour.

Secondly, the abolition of death. Let's think about each of those in turn. Firstly, at Christmas we celebrate the birth of a Saviour.

Christianity isn't a set of ideas. It's not a wishful thinking or a kind of philosophy with no evidence. Rather it is about a person who came into history.

[3 : 20] Jesus Christ, fully man and fully God. And just as 2,000 years ago, if we had been alive we could have met the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar.

So too we could have met Jesus Christ in person. The gospel writers tell us they are writing historical eyewitness accounts of the events.

They give us details of places. They give us names of people. They were writing just 30 years or so after the events.

The point being of course that you could go back. You could go to those places. You could interview those people. Is this how it really happened? The fourth series of the Netflix production, The Crown, has caused considerable controversy over the last few weeks.

Because so much of it is fiction. The government has even asked Netflix to post a health warning on the program. Peter Morgan, the producer, has defended the storyline.

[4 : 20] Saying that it rings true. The point being you see that 40 years or so after the event set in the mid to early 1980s.

There are plenty of people still alive who know all too well the difference between something which rings of the truth. Which has the ring of truth about it.

And a storyline that is true. Now how much more would be the case with the gospel accounts where there is so much more at stake?

To say that they only ring true really is to set the bar far too low. No, they are historically reliable. Do talk to me or a Christian friend afterwards if you'd like to think a little bit more about that. So notice then on the screen who Jesus Christ was.

[5 : 20] He's described as our saviour, Christ Jesus. He's the Christ which simply means he's God's king, he's God's ruler. But he's also saviour.

That's why we had that first reading this afternoon from the prophet Isaiah written 700 years before the birth of Jesus. God said through the prophet that he would send a saviour who would rid our world of everything that's wrong.

Who would usher in a new world. A world which is exactly how it should be. And it's why then in that reading from Luke's gospel when the angels announced the significance of Jesus' birth.

They say I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you.

He is Christ the Lord. You see I wonder what you'd like for Christmas. Now don't get your hopes up I've done all my Christmas shopping.

[6 : 28] But just imagine I imagine that this year our Christmas wish list is perhaps slightly different from usual. I imagine that most of us would want far more than I don't know an Xbox or a pair of pyjamas or jewellery or whatever it is.

I guess what we really want is for Covid to go away. For life to return to normal. To be able to see family and friends.

To plan for work and business. To be able to book a holiday knowing that we can go on that holiday. And yet of course wonderful as that will be. The fact is that even when Covid is long past we will still be faced with daily headlines that remind us that the world we live in is not as it should be.

And the Bible tells us that that is because we are not as we should be. The Bible's diagnosis is that each of us by nature live our own way without God.

We may still believe in him. But in terms of day to day life we live our own way without him. It means we fail to love and serve other people as we should.

[7 : 45] It means we fail to care for the environment and our world as we should. It's what the Bible calls sin. In other words that promise that we've heard about.

That God would send a saviour. To rid our world of everything that's wrong. To usher in a new world. A world that's just as it's meant to be.

Is very wonderful indeed. It means that actually the first thing to celebrate at Christmas isn't that Jesus is a kind of father Christmas figure.

Who simply came to entertain us. Or that he's a government advisor type figure. Who came to give us information. Rather it is that he is in a sense like a vaccine.

He came to save us. At Christmas we celebrate the birth of a saviour. But secondly at Christmas we celebrate the abolition of death.

[8 : 50] Have a look again at the screen. It speaks of our saviour Christ Jesus. Who abolished death. Now I guess like all of us.

Lots of things in our family and household have been cancelled this year. Almost too many to mention. Holidays. Family gatherings.

Meetings with friends. A levels. School. A special trip away. And of course the one year we managed to get tickets for Wimbledon in the ballot. Was the one year the whole thing was cancelled.

Cancelled. And the headlines this morning telling us that Christmas has also been cancelled as well apparently. But you see here's a cancellation we can celebrate.

Death being cancelled. Abolished. Now of course in a sense it just sounds absurd doesn't it? But it's not talking so much about the end of this life.

[9 : 51] It's not so much talking about the end of a physical death. Rather it's a reminder that Jesus didn't remain a baby. He grew up.

One of the striking things about the eyewitness gospel accounts is the way in which they show Jesus resolutely setting his face to go to Jerusalem where he will be crucified. Because just as God told the prophet Isaiah 700 years beforehand that he would send a saviour. He also explained how he would come as a servant. To die in the place of others. To take the right and just punishment we deserve for living our way without God.

And more than that that three days later he would rise again from the grave never to die again. Which means that Jesus has abolished death.

[10:51] Yes all die physically but there is new physical life beyond the grave for those who trust in him. After all what does our verse from the Bible go on to say?

Christ Jesus who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. Now that word life it's not simply talking about living but about having life with God.

Knowing God. Belonging to God as his people. Living life as it's meant to be. And that word immortality is talking not simply about having life with God in this world.

But supremely life with God in the next. That's what we sing in some of our best loved Christmas carols.

The third verse of Harold ends with the words. Born that man no more may die. Born to raise the sons of earth. Born to give them second birth.

[11:57] Born to give them third. I wonder if you saw the social media footage a couple of weeks ago of Stephen Ellison. A British diplomat in the Chinese city of Chongqing.

And he was hailed a hero. Having dived into a river. And saving a woman from drowning. The video clip shows her slipping on a rock. Struggling in the current. Disappearing under the water.

Her body going under a bridge. Coming out the other side face down. At which point you can see suddenly from the side of the film footage. Stephen Ellison taking off his shoes and socks.

Diving into the water. And dragging her to safety. Well how much greater the rescue that Jesus Christ brings.

It couldn't be more relevant could it. After all a vaccine won't abolish coronavirus. It may just enable us to live with it.

[12:57] And it certainly won't abolish death. Whereas Jesus Christ has through his death on the cross. Paid the penalty for sin. And thereby abolished death.

For those who trust in him. He offers life. With God. In this world. And the next. Christ. Well let me finish by addressing two groups.

Of people. First of all. If you're here this afternoon. And you have not yet put your trust. In Jesus Christ. You may be skeptical. You may be interested. Or perhaps you don't really know what you think.

Well we'd love you to investigate. A little bit further. We'll be running a course. Called Christianity Explored. In the new year. On Zoom. It's a course which is widely run. By churches. Up and down the country.

And you'd be very welcome. Indeed. To join it. If you want to. If you're the sort of person. Who has loads of questions. You can ask loads of questions. But we won't put you on the spot. Or anything like that.

[14:00] And you can sign up. On the website. You'd also be very welcome. To join us. For our Sunday morning services. In January. Either in person. Or on Zoom.

For four weeks. We're going to have a whole series of talks. On what it means. To come back to God. And we're going to think about God's heart. For those who are far from him. And his open. Wide arms. The welcome he gives. Those who turn back to him. So that's Sunday mornings. 9.45. Or 11.15.

Either here in person. Or 9.45. On Zoom. Well for those who have already. Put our trust in Jesus. This is a glorious reminder.

Of just how good God is. And just how good it is. To know Jesus. It's so easy isn't it. To forget that. Just in the busyness.

[15:00] Of life. Or perhaps of all the kind of chopping. And changing. That all of us have experienced. Over the last few weeks. And months. And yet of course. The reality is.

If this year. Has shown us anything. It is that our culture. Really has no answers. In the face of death. Other than protect the NHS.

And hope for a vaccine. It really is the most wonderful thing. To know Jesus Christ. So experience. Life with God. Now.

In this life. And to be certain of it. For the next. Well we'll have a few moments. For reflection. And then Ben will come and introduce.

Our last Carol. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.