

Carol Service

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 2. In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria, and all went to be registered, each to his own town.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary his betrothed, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear.

And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

[1 : 3 0] And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go over to Bethlehem, and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.

And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the same that had been told to them concerning this child.

And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds had told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering 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. Well, let me add my welcome to Mark's. My name is Simon Dowdy. I'm the Minister of Grace Church.

[2 : 4 9] It's very good to have you with us for this carous service this morning, especially if it's your first time at Grace Church. Now, in a recent opinion poll, people were asked what they thought was the most important thing about Christmas.

Now, I wonder how you'd answer that question yourself. Perhaps having some time off work. Perhaps good food and lots of it. Perhaps watching some telly.

Although, of course, Christmas telly in the past is always much better, wasn't it, than Christmas telly is now. Or opening presents. Well, in the opinion poll, 67%, 67% of the population said the most important thing about Christmas is spending time with friends and family.

In fact, across the country as a whole, only 10% of the adult population said that the religious meaning of Christmas was the most important thing to them.

And amongst 25 to 34-year-olds, that figure was just 4%. It suggests, doesn't it, that as a culture, it suggests that we have lost sight, so to speak, of what is at the heart of Christmas and the real significance of Christmas.

[4 : 13] So what I want to do in these next few minutes is to go back to that reading from Luke chapter 2 and to focus in particular on those two verses which are printed there on the back of the service sheet to help us to understand what was really going on when Jesus was born.

After all, I take it that's why you're here this morning, because you want to focus on what Christmas is really all about. And Luke tells us in his account of the birth of Jesus, he tells us three things.

First of all, it is not myth, but fact. Now some of you may know this, but Luke, who wrote Luke's Gospel, is generally regarded as an excellent historian.

He's put together a carefully ordered account using eyewitness evidence. That first reading from Luke chapter 2 anchors the birth of Jesus at a time when Caesar Augustus was emperor, when Quirinius was the governor of Syria.

And as you read through Luke's Gospel, you discover all his facts about the important people of the day, people like Caiaphas the high priest, John the Baptist, Herod the king, Pontius Pilate.

[5 : 30] They're all confirmed by other sources, by other non-Christian historians. In other words, these things really happened.

In fact, Luke tells us he's gone to the most enormous lengths to make sure that what he writes for us is historical, is fact. Just listen to how he begins his account of Jesus' life.

Just see if you can pick that up. He says this. Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who were the first eyewitnesses.

Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good to me to write an orderly account to you, most excellent Theophilus, who is the guy who is writing the Gospel for, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

That's not the language, is it, of myth. It's the language of history, of eyewitness accounts, of facts. Now, I hope I'm not going to upset anyone by saying this, but a few years ago, the Guardian newspaper estimated that if every child who believed in Father Christmas were to get a visit from Father Christmas on Christmas Eve, then Father Christmas would need 214,200 reindeer, and they would have to travel at 650 miles per second in order to visit everyone.

[7 : 24] Father Christmas clearly belongs to the world of fantasy. But sadly, of course, there are many people who put Jesus in that same bracket, in that same realm of fantasy, if you like, together with Father Christmas and the flying snowman.

Something perhaps that we think is nice for the children to believe in, but actually as they grow up and enter the adult world, then of course we leave it all behind, and that is that. But no, Jesus belongs to the world of fact, of history.

If you've read the God delusion that Mark was talking about earlier, I hope that one of the things actually you're disappointed about is the way in which Richard Dawkins simply fails to engage with the historical evidence for who Jesus Christ is.

So what should our response be to what Luke writes? Well, Luke tells us that when the shepherds heard the message of the angels, they said to each other, let's go and see if this is true.

And I take it that we should do the same. That we should ask ourselves the question, have we really considered the facts? Because Christianity is not about a kind of leap of faith or anything like that.

[8 : 44] It's not myth. It is about fact. Secondly, not just the birth of a baby, but the birth of a saviour.

Luke's record of the birth of Jesus is very, very down to earth. And it's only really when the angel arrives to speak to the shepherds on the hillside that the significance of the birth of Jesus becomes clear.

Let's just have a look at those couple of sentences there at the top of the back of the service sheet there. The angel said to them, fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a saviour who is Christ the Lord. Jesus was born a saviour, a rescuer.

In fact, one of the things that struck me again just this last week is how many of the carols that we sing speak of Jesus as being a saviour, a rescuer.

[9 : 49] And they're simply reflecting what the Bible tells us. But of course it does lead us, doesn't it, to ask the question, what is it we need to be rescued from if Jesus came as a rescuer?

Well, Jesus made it very clear that all of us have a wrong attitude to God. That we don't want God telling us how to run our lives.

That we don't want him to be God over us. And I guess that opinion poll actually says it all, doesn't it? That actually when God himself comes into the world as Jesus Christ, what is it we value most about it?

Actually, it's not that at all. It's simply spending time with friends and family. Because in truth, we just want to get on with our lives without reference to God.

Now what I'm describing is what the Bible calls sin. And what Jesus called sin. Which is not the stuff that fills the front page of the tabloid newspapers.

[10 : 52] Rather, it is describing our attitude to God. Now imagine for a moment a head teacher of a school goes off for a couple of weeks during term time to go and visit a few other schools and to see what she can learn from other schools and from other head teachers.

And she leaves her two deputy head teachers in charge of the school while she's away. And she gives them very strict instructions. She says, look, I'm going away for a couple of weeks.

And I want you to run the school while I'm away. I want to keep in touch with you by email, phone call. I expect you to keep me in touch with the decisions that you make.

Tell me how things are going. And this is how I'd like you to run the school over the next couple of weeks. Now while she's away, the two deputy heads behave very differently.

One of them rolls into school every morning, late, often drunk, telling everyone exactly what he thinks of the head teacher. And tears north of this disgrace.

[11 : 55] The other one is quite different. He dresses smartly. He arrives on time. He gives the staff everything they ask for.

From his appearance, he gives the impression that he's doing a very good job. What no one realises is that he's never called up the head teacher in her absence.

He's never read her emails. He's never responded to her phone calls. She's simply running the school. He's simply running the school for his own benefit.

He actually thinks exactly the same about the head teacher as the other deputy head. See, the two men behave very differently.

In fact, their attitude towards the head teacher is the same. And Jesus tells us that is how it is between us and God. And there'll be some of us here this morning, and if we're honest with ourselves, we know that actually we have failed God and let God down badly.

[12 : 55] Others, we look fine on the outside. We may go to church occasionally. But nonetheless, in terms of our day-to-day lives and things we really value, God doesn't get a look in.

And Jesus is very clear that that is bad news on the day of judgment. But wonderfully, Jesus was born to deal with the problem of sin.

He was born a saviour. He was born a rescuer. I guess for many of us, one of the most memorable events, perhaps looking back over the last year or so, was the rescue of those 33 miners trapped in that mine in Chile, in the Atacama Desert.

Trapped for two months, 600 metres underground. Apparently, as the miners were rescued and came up to the surface, apparently there were 2,000 journalists there, all capturing it and then broadcasting things back home to their home countries.

And I guess many of us would have been glued to our computer screens or to our television screens as the first of those miners came to the surface, rescued from the bowels of the earth.

[14 : 12] Well, Jesus was born that first Christmas in order to die, to rescue us. Those little baby hands, when grown up, were nailed to a cross for us to take the punishment that we deserve for the way in which we have treated God.

Now, that is the real peace that Christmas brings. You often hear, don't you, the word peace, kind of banded around around Christmas time. That is the real peace that Jesus brings.

Peace with God. It means that we can know God as his people and to know him not only in this life, but in the next one as well.

If we are at peace with God, it means that we can know him as our friend. It means we can know that when we are on our deathbed, that beyond, we will face God as our saviour and rescuer and heavenly father and not as our judge.

So the birth of Jesus is not myth but fact. Not just a baby, but a saviour. And thirdly, not old news. But good news.

[15 : 31] Just have a look again at what the angel says. The birth of Jesus is good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

I think it's easy in our culture to imagine that Christianity is good news for some people, but not for all people. Perhaps for a certain type of person, perhaps a religious person, or perhaps someone who likes church, or for old people, or for good people, or for those who enjoy singing hymns and carols and things.

But of course, if that is how we think, we need to think again. These were shepherds. You know, working class, hard, tough and men. And for them, the birth of Jesus is good news of great joy.

I guess one of our problems at Christmas is perhaps that everyone knows the story, don't we? You know, Mary and Joseph, the wise men, the shepherds, the angels, the baby in the manger.

And of course, if we've heard it all before, as many of us have, it's so easy simply to treat it as part of the furniture. And we fail to appreciate what good news it is.

[16 : 45] I wonder if you remember that Chinese vase. Do you remember that? It was sold at auction back in November for 53 million pounds.

It was sold by a brother and sister who'd been, they'd been clearing out their parents' house. Their parents had died. They'd been clearing out their parents' house in Pinner in North London. We used to live near Pinner, actually.

It was a place my mum used to go to Sainsbury's. You know, it's not a particularly exciting place. Sainsbury's is what it is. It's a very ordinary kind of place. But they were clearing out their parents' house.

They found this vase. They put it on one side on top of the bookcase while they carried on sorting things out. Then at any point it could have sort of toppled off and smashed onto the ground. It was only once they'd finished sorting everything out they thought, oh well, let's get the thing valued.

Perhaps they'd been watching the Antiques Roadshow or something like that. It was valued for a million pounds and went on to fetch 53 million at auction. And the auctioneer commented, the brother and sister had no idea what they had.

[17 : 53] And it's quite possible to be like that with Christmas. Never really to appreciate what very good news it is. It's there but we never really discover it.

It's there but we never really do anything with it, with what we hear. And so in three weeks' time once the festivities are all over we pack up our Christmas tree and the decorations and everything else we put Jesus away as well and he goes up into the loft for another 11 months.

Now let me say I have no idea where you stand on all this. Maybe you're someone here this morning and you're not really into church very much.

You don't really think of God very often at all but you like singing carols and we're delighted you're here there this morning to come and share in our carol service if that is you. But can I encourage you not to put Jesus Christ to one side for another year.

Can I encourage you to think about what you've heard. That booklet which Mark was talking about would be a great thing just to take home and read.

[19 : 06] One of the things we're doing in the new year is to run a course called Christianity Explored. You'll see there's a feedback form inside the service sheet there. If you'd like to do that then do just tick one of the boxes.

Christianity Explored is a course which is run up and down the country in loads and loads of churches and it's a great either sort of an introductory course to what is at the heart of the claims of Jesus Christ or an opportunity perhaps to go over the basics again.

And again if that is if you'd be interested in that then do tick the box and put the form in the box on the welcome table. Of course it may be that you're someone who perhaps you've drifted away from Christian things perhaps you made a commitment to Jesus Christ as a teenager or in your twenties perhaps your life kind of got busy and you just drifted away.

But again what that Christianity Explored course would be a really excellent thing to do in the new year. And I'll say finally that for those of us who do know that this is true who do know that Jesus Christ is our saviour and who are friends with God.

What do you think about how you can ensure that this Christmas is a Christmas when you rejoice in the fact that Jesus has come as a saviour. And I say that to myself as much as anyone.

[20 : 34] It's perhaps especially a challenge for those of us who are parents to ensure that actually the thing our children get most excited about is not the presence but the fact that Jesus Christ has come as a saviour.

It's hard too isn't it for those of us who will be perhaps with friends and families who don't understand what Christmas is about either. The angel said fear not I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people for unto you is born this day in the city of David a saviour who is Christ the Lord.

Amen.