

Advent Service

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Date: 16 December 2018

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[0 : 0 0] The first reading comes from Micah, chapter 5, verses 2 to 5a. But you, O Bethlehem of Fratha, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler of Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth. Then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure.

For now he shall be great to the ends of the earth, and he shall be their peace. Our second reading is from Luke, chapter 2, verses 1 to 7.

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.

[1 : 2 1] 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.

Luke, chapter 2, verse 8 to 20.

The shepherds and the angels. And 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.

And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heaven hosts, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom he is pleased.

[2 : 5 3] 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 saying that had been told with them concerning his child, and who heard it wondered at what the shepherds 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.

This reading is from John, chapter 1, verses 1 to 14 and verse 18.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

[4 : 03] In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 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 bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

The true light, which gives light to 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 of the will of man, but of God.

And the word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the father, full of grace and truth.

[5 : 22] No one has ever seen God, the only God, who is at the father's side. He has made him known. Shall I pray as we come to think this evening about the true meaning of Christmas?

Let's pray. Father, please would you help us to learn more about why the Lord Jesus came to this earth. Please help us to understand what you've told us in the Bible.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. One of the problems with Christmas is that we know the story so well, or at least we think we know the story so well.

Of course, Christmas is really like the Disneyfication of Christianity. Actually, the real story is far more striking than perhaps we think it is.

Take those readings that we hear every year, those familiar phrases that we hear beamed out on Christmas Eve from Cambridge about a wonderful counselor, a mighty God, and an everlasting father.

[6 : 32] Familiar, certainly. Apparently, there were 322 statements like that about Jesus in the first half of the Bible.

There were prophets giving advance warning of Jesus and what he's going to be like. And some mathematician calculated what was the probability that all 322 predictions could be fulfilled by one single person.

And he said, this is a typical mathematician's, sorry if you're a mathematician, typical mathematician's approach to some literature, the chances were one in 840,000, million, million, million, million, million, 16 times.

In other words, it wouldn't happen every day. And then there's the star, sufficiently unusual to drag three rich political advisors all the way from Iraq on some vague feeling that this is important.

And God sent the choir along to fill the sky with singing. I mean, that must have made people jump. Now people sometimes say, if God exists, why doesn't he write it in the sky, make it obvious?

[7 : 51] Well, that little spectacular thought up by heaven's pyrotechnics department, I mean, that's a pretty clear message and it gets written in the sky for us. And as for the baby lying in swaddling clothes in a manger, we may say, no, that's what Christmas is all about.

Oh, could you, could you, coo? But God gets his angel to say that the baby stuff is just a sign. And the whole point of any sign is the thing that it points to.

So what does it mean? I mean, God went to a whole lot of trouble to get it clear for us. The angel broadcasted out loud the true meaning of Christmas was announced to us.

Today in Bethlehem, a savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. One of my children used to call an exclamation mark a shout.

When you think about it, that's a very good way of describing an exclamation mark, isn't it? This Christmas story about Jesus ought to have about 10 shouts at the end of that phrase, isn't it?

[8 : 58] It's supposed to grab us by the throat. Do you get the point? How special Jesus is? So let's have a look at that declaration that God makes so that we understand what it's all about.

And I've got two simple things to say this evening. Here's the first. That what we're being told, first of all, is that Jesus is a rescuer. This very night, your savior has been born.

Well, that is a startling idea, isn't it? I mean, how could a baby rescue anybody? In my experience, babies are normally the ones who need to be rescued from getting stuck somewhere or from getting food all over their faces or from a poeey nappy.

But the angels say the baby, the baby is a savior sent to rescue other people. Extraordinary. And that's why it's very important to ask questions about what Jesus did when he grew up.

If you go to Trafalgar Square, that statue of Nelson on top of the column, it doesn't have him in a pushchair. And when we think about Winston Churchill puffing on his cigar, we think of him as a man or a four-year-old with a cigar in his mouth.

[10 : 17] Now, what Jesus did is remembered not by a manger, but by a cross. It's how Jesus ended up that matters. Because it's as he died at that moment, there was the world's greatest rescue mission.

The tabloid headline, if you like, would read, Kid born in shed saves world. It's an extraordinary claim, isn't it? Jesus came to save the world, a rescuer.

Why do I need it? You may feel, you know, I didn't realize I needed a rescue, let alone that Jesus was a rescuer for me. And the simple answer is I need it because I'm in a real pickle.

I'm in the wrong with God. And the reason for that is that the Bible's clear. It's because we've all treated God wrong. We've turned our backs on him. We've not acknowledged that God has got rights over us.

Even if we say we believe in him, we don't actually want him to be God over us. I'm guilty of that sin and I guess you are too. We all need to be rescued from the results of that kind of behavior.

[11 : 31] We can't just pass the buck and blame everybody and everything else. I don't know if you've heard there's a sort of dog roll poem that's written about going to a psychiatrist.

Includes lines like this. When I was one, my mummy hid my doll in a trunk and so it follows naturally that I am always drunk. When I was three, I had a feeling of ambivalence towards my brothers and so it follows naturally I poisoned all my lovers.

And it ends up by saying, but I am happy now I've learned the lesson this has taught that everything that I do wrong is someone else's fault. That would be very convenient but it's not what the Bible reckons.

When a newspaper posed the question what's wrong with the world? The Catholic thinker G.K. Chesterton reputedly wrote a brief response that said, dear sirs, I am.

Sincerely yours, G.K. Chesterton. That's the attitude of somebody who's grasped the message of Jesus. The problem is in here not out there.

[12 : 39] I'm not going to solve the problem with greater social care, greater education, greater health care. It takes honesty to admit that the real problem begins here.

What is wrong is me. There was a man who was in court he was pleading his innocence and he listened for several hours to all the court proceedings and then shouted out I want to change my plea I'm guilty.

And the judge said to him why didn't you say that hours ago? And the man said I didn't realise it until I heard all the evidence. So here's my question to you. How would the evidence against you sound?

And are you willing to agree I'm guilty? We may feel guilty. We may feel no guilt whatsoever but either way we still need a rescuer.

That's God's verdict on us. Whether we feel we do or not we need a rescuer. And the good news of Christmas is exactly this. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you.

[13 : 47] A few years ago we had a family holiday to Centre Parks and I learnt to windsurf there. Well actually I went on a windsurfing board and across a shallow pond there was a very rough storm on the shallow pond.

My life was in danger you've got to understand. Anyway I got to the other side and got stuck and I was told that what to do if you get stuck is to self-rescue which basically means to lie flat on your board and sort of swim back.

That's not a rescue that's swimming on a board looking ridiculous. So I stayed the other side of the pond and put it on my hand and waited until somebody came to rescue me. It was very embarrassing to be towed home.

My family thought it was extremely funny but I was very grateful. Once you know you need rescue however embarrassing it is to admit it once you know you need a rescuer then Christmas is great news.

It is great joy that Jesus was born to be just that kind of rescuer. Today a saviour has been born to you. But the angel also says something else.

[15 : 00] another part of the ten inch banner headline on the front of God's newspaper is this. That the saviour who is born is also Christ the Lord. And Christ is not a surname we perhaps think it is you know he was Mr. J. Christ but Christ is more of a job description like Sam the fireman or Bob the builder.

This is Jesus the Christ. And it's another word for saying that he is king. So the Jesus who we've already seen is a rescuer that we need the angel also says he's a king.

Because that's what Christ means. It means the person who's been anointed and the people who get anointed are kings. In other words this tiny little baby is a king.

Actually he is the king. He is the king over all of God's world. Christmas is about Jesus being the king supreme over every other king.

It's an amazing thought. It's a bit like trying to squeeze a battleship into a bathtub or trying to get the whole of the shard into a doll's house.

[16 : 12] What you've got here when Jesus came to earth is all of God's godness squeezed into a man cub. Incredible density.

Because when Jesus came to earth he didn't somehow leave behind some of his godness. He wasn't less than God. He wasn't sort of God minus the goddish bits. He was all God crammed into a human body.

So we've got to be under no illusions as we think about our coochie coochie coo baby at Christmas. We mustn't confuse the baby with a nobody. Jesus really is the king who is in charge and so much in charge that one day we're all going to meet him and when we do we will have to give an account of our lives.

A bit like the teacher and the Ofsted inspector. The Ofsted inspector comes in and examines every lesson plan and has the power the ability to declare a school failing.

In exactly the same way we will stand behind before the king and have to give an account to him who inspects every bit of our life. This baby is that kind of king.

[17 : 32] I don't know if you've been watching the recent BBC drama Mrs. Wilson but it shone an unforgiving light on the second world war author Alexander Wilson who was also a spy and a bigamist or was he if you're watching the program sorry spoiler alert it's all very unclear exactly what he was and new bits of information keep emerging through the story and the striking thing this is a real story based on real facts and there is now his extended family of over 50 his children and grandchildren and great grandchildren who do not know the truth about this shady character.

At the birth of Jesus it was the exact opposite of that it's like we were handed the full story full disclosure under the freedom of information act this is what the king of all is like this is what God is like this is what God in a human body is like the king of all he chose a tiny town common shepherds an animal feeding trough the earthy smell of manure all around this down to earth king gets his hands dirty to come alongside the little people normal people people like us anonymous people the kind of people who well nobody will have heard of us will they in 150 years time and probably in 200 years time even our family won't remember our names and yet this is the God who came down to people like us you see what that says says we matter I matter you matter we matter not just to the people who we think we matter to but we matter to the Lord of all the king of everything we matter enough to this king that he came to be our rescuer isn't that a startling thought just singing in the song a moment ago the king of heaven who is now the friend of sinners isn't that extraordinary why would he notice you so here is the real

Christmas message written in the sky so that we would understand the point of the sign what the baby is pointing us to God got it delivered straight this baby is the rescuer this baby is the king and to miss that is to miss everything it's to live in a make-believe world of reindeer and white fluffy beards and ho ho ho ho Disney Christianity but those for those who recognize that Jesus is the king of everything and that Jesus is the rescuer that I need once you recognize that then Christmas is really good news of great joy in a world that is confused and losing and losing its way and uncertain here is something solid a word from another world a person from another world the king of all come to provide rescue for us so why not make this

Christmas your best Christmas yet grab hold of that rescue that Jesus brings it would be daft to pretend you don't need it unless you think everything that's wrong in the world is somebody else's fault and bow the knee to Jesus as your king it would be daft to do otherwise unless you are confident to stand beside before a lion and feel you're not in danger the rescuer and the king Simon was saying earlier about Christmas is often the time when people think I'd like to think more about this Jesus thing this Christianity that my friends seem to think is so important I never really thought about it and he was outlining some of the ways he might like to do that reading something or maybe talking with others exploring who this Jesus is I mean because if he is the king and if the king says I need a rescuer then it would be daft to do anything other than to say thank you thank you king for coming to be my rescuer today a savior who is

Christ the Lord let me pray as we finish let me pray Lord Jesus thank you that you who are the king of kings supreme over everything the one who holds the whole world in your hand you Lord and king Jesus came to this earth for the little people to be the rescuer that we need this is good news of great joy and perhaps in a time like this when the country the world seems lost how wonderful it is to hear something solid and real and good to its very core so please would you help us to grab hold of this rescue that you offer to us and to bow before you as our king we ask this in your name amen and so this is in