

Carols by Candlelight 2022

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Date: 11 December 2022

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] The first reading today is from Micah, chapter 5, verses 1 to 5a. Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops. Siege is laid against us.

With a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek. But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time where 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 flocks 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 Matthew, chapter 1.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

[1 : 18] And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. The reading is from Matthew, chapter 2, verses 1 to 12.

Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

[2 : 52] For we saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them whether Christ was to be born. They told him, in Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet, And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah.

For from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly, and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.

And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.

After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them, until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

[4 : 11] When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.

Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And, being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Our last reading will be from the Gospel according to John. John chapter 1. 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. 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.

[5 : 25] He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which enlightens 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 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 the will of the flesh, nor 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. No one has ever seen God, the only God, who is at the Father's side.

He has made him known. Let me have my welcome to Benji's. My name is Simon Dowdy, and I'm the pastor here at Grace Church, and we are delighted to have you with us this evening.

Now, in our household, there's a long tradition of trying to guess what is in presence before Christmas Day. I mean, no one obviously actually admits to doing this, but it tends to come out afterwards.

[6 : 40] How large is it? How heavy is it? Is it kind of uniform, shaped like a book, or is it regularly shaped? Does it make a noise? Does it smell of anything?

Looking for clues about what's inside, once all the wrapping has been stripped away. Well, over the next few minutes, I want to do that with Christmas itself.

And to ask the question, once we've stripped away all the wrapping, so to speak, the Christmas tree, the festivities, the presents, the turkey, Christmas telly, time off work, time with family, once we have stripped all of that away, what is it that we find underneath?

What's it all about? And we're going to look again at that second reading, which we had from Matthew's Gospel. It's there on the screen. It's also there in the orders of service as well. Matthew's eyewitness account of the life of Jesus.

And in particular, we're going to focus on the two names that the angel tells Jesus' dad, Joseph, Jesus is going to be given.

[7 : 46] Now, I guess for most of us, our names are probably of little significance. Other than the fact that our parents like them. So my name's Simon, means listening and obedience.

So I think I can be fairly confident that my parents were either ridiculously optimistic or they had no clue whatsoever about what the name means. But Jesus' names are full of significance because they explain who he is and why he came.

Firstly, notice Jesus, the Savior. What is it the angel says to Joseph?

She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins. Notice there's both the name and the meaning, the significance of the name.

Because the name Jesus means the Lord saves. And we're told the reason he came to earth was to save people from their sins. Now let me ask a question.

[8 : 56] Do you think that is a small thing or a big thing? Just kind of mentally, on a sort of scale of one to ten, do you think that is a small thing? A sort of one or a two?

Or a big thing? A kind of nine or a ten or perhaps somewhere in the middle? Well, I guess it depends whether we think sin is a small thing or a big thing.

Sin, I think, is probably one of the least understood words in the English language. We either think it's trivial, that it's just kind of overindulgence at Christmas, perhaps too many mince pies on Christmas Day or perhaps too many mince pies too soon ahead of Christmas Day.

Or we think you have to be a real baddie to have the title of sinner like Vladimir Putin or Donald Trump or someone like that. But when the Bible talks about sin, it's talking about saying no to God being in charge of our lives.

We may still believe in God, we may say our prayers, but we don't want God to be God over us. I could be a delightful person and be like that, or I could be a dreadful person and act like that towards God.

[10 : 12] I might be a regular churchgoer or a self-confessed atheist. Whichever, we ignore God as far as day-to-day life is concerned.

In other words, we enjoy all the gifts that God gives us, life, family, friendships, a beautiful natural world, work, rest, food, but we don't want to know the giver.

That is what the Bible means when it talks about sin. And I imagine most of us, if we're honest with ourselves, then we'll see that actually it describes the way in which we are.

And you and I live with the consequences of that every day. It explains why our lives aren't the way so often we'd like our lives to be.

We let ourselves down, we let others down, we say and do things that we regret. It explains why our family life so often is not the way we'd like it to be.

[11 : 13] We fall out with each other. There are misunderstandings. There was even an interview on Radio 4's Today programme this week about how to deal with family Christmas disagreements.

And apparently the trick is to get your argument in first before anyone else can get there. It explains too why our world isn't the way we'd like it to be.

Climate change, the war in Ukraine, corruption, multiple complex problems that governments across the world can't deal with. And yet the reason there's so much wrong with our lives and with our world is not because there's something wrong with God but because there's something wrong with us.

It's funny, isn't it, how quickly we can find ourselves pointing the finger. You know, how can you believe in God when dot dot dot I wonder what your when dot dot dot would be.

And yet Jesus points the finger the other way. I love the story of a little boy who sat down one Christmas to write a letter to Jesus.

[12 : 27] He began, Dear Jesus, I've been good for a whole year, please give me a bicycle for Christmas. Well, he thought about it for a while and he realised he hadn't been good for a whole year so he thought he better draft another letter.

Dear Jesus, I've been good for a whole month. But actually that wasn't true either. So, third draft, Dear Jesus, I've been good for but actually he hadn't even been good for a whole day.

And then he looked around the room and he saw the Christmas tree and next to the Christmas tree he saw the crib with all the figures of the nativity and he went over to the crib and he picked up the figure of the Virgin Mary, Jesus' mother, put it in his pocket and started to write another letter.

Dear Jesus, if you want your mother back, please may I have a bicycle for Christmas. Well, I wonder if you've got to the point that that little boy had got to of realising that you are not good enough for girls.

And as a result each one of us faces the judgement on the final day. One of the things I love about Jesus is his wonderful combination of compassion and truth and in his great kindness he tells us about the judgement to come because warnings are always acts of kindness, aren't they?

[13 : 49] Think of the parent warning the toddler don't run off into the road and Jesus warns us about the judgement that all of us face an eternity without God.

Now that's the starting point of grasping why there's so much to celebrate at Christmas because Jesus came as a saviour. it's what we sing in some of our most popular carols.

So once in Royal David City speaks of Jesus who lived on earth our saviour holy. Silent Night which we've just sung proclaims that Christ the saviour is born.

It's funny isn't it how we kind of sing these carols year after year if we regularly come to carol services and it's so easy just to miss the staggering truths that are contained in them.

Jesus the saviour. But secondly Jesus God with us because the second name that Jesus is going to be given is there in sentence number twenty three.

[14 : 54] Let me read it for us. Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call his name Emmanuel which means God with us.

Again we're told the name Emmanuel and the meaning the significance God with us. The birth of Jesus is no fairy tale or myth these are historical facts as Benji said you're very welcome to take away one of these copies of a gospel of an eyewitness account and to read it through these events really happened.

In other words the existence of Jesus is not in any doubt. the real issue is his identity. Who was he? And Matthew together with all the other gospel writers say that he was indeed God in the flesh God with us.

And that of course is why his birth was so unusual. A virgin birth. We're told aren't we how Mary and Joseph were engaged how embarrassed Joseph was to discover that Mary was pregnant.

A virgin birth birth. Well it's not an everyday occurrence. But nor is God coming into his world an everyday occurrence either. By definition things which are beyond our normal experience are going to happen.

[16 : 17] Now I don't know about you but I guess our danger in 2022 is that we tend to dismiss the miracles of Jesus out of hand simply because they're beyond our experience. as one wag has put it I can just about believe in the virgin birth but three wise men well that is far too much of a stretch.

But if God has come to earth then we should expect things beyond our experience out of the ordinary to happen. In fact the birth of Jesus is such a unique event that as Matthew reminds us God had put the world on notice 700 years previously through the prophet Isaiah that this is what would happen.

What's more when Jesus grew up he claimed to be God and he did the kinds of things that only God can do. On one occasion he calmed a massive storm that was terrifying the local fishermen I take it it takes quite a storm doesn't it to terrify fishermen and he did it simply by speaking to the wind and the waves and all was calm now who can do that but the God who made the wind and the waves on another occasion he raised a little girl who was dead and of course people were so much more familiar with death than we are he raised her to life imagine going to the mortuary at King's Hospital and doing that death you can only do it if you're the God who has the power over life and death you see the point is this that although you and I have never seen God actually we could have seen him if we had been born 2000 years ago rather than when we were born isn't that not a staggering thought we could have seen

God in flesh and bones as these eyewitnesses saw him God has come to earth but we still haven't answered the question why why did he come why did Jesus become God with us well it links back to that first name he came to be a saviour those little hands when Jesus grew up were nailed to a cross not as an accident of history not as a miscarriage of justice but Jesus died on the cross as the saviour that we need to take the just penalty we deserve for our sin to bear the judgment of God so that we don't have to what's more three days later he rose from the dead never to die again it means that if we put our trust in Jesus we can indeed know

God with us forgiven by God and restored wonderfully to a right relationship with God now I imagine there are some of us here this evening and God is a stranger to us and yet wonderfully he needn't be as those who are committed Christians here will testify I guess it's true isn't it that for countless people across the world this last year has been a year of restoring friendships and relationships after the pandemic countless airports arrival hauls and you can see it as people who haven't been able to see each other for two years or longer actually have the joy of relationships being restored well imagine the joy of being restored to a right relationship with the living God both in this world and also in the next now some of us here in this room will know that joy already it's a glorious thing to celebrate let's make sure that as we gather this Christmas with family and friends let's make sure we have a thoroughly

[20 : 41] Jesus centered Christmas and that he is at the very heart of all our celebrations but I guess some of us won't know that joy and those of us who do know it why we would love you to come to know and experience that same joy for yourself because like any present it has to be personally received as Benji mentioned earlier there are various things you can do to find out more we'd love you to take away one of these gospel accounts through these booklets Benji mentioned good news great joy and also we'd love you to join the Christianity explore courses the course that's run in churches up and down the country in the new year if you'd like to if you're not sure about it then do feel free just to come along to the first one if it's not your thing then that's fine but we'd love you to come along nonetheless of course it may be you're someone and actually frankly you're more dismissive of the Christian faith but please don't dismiss it until you've investigated the claims and done so as a grown up so to speak there's good evidence for the trustworthiness of the

Bible there's good evidence for the claim that Jesus Christ was indeed God in the flesh supremely his resurrection from the dead never to die again well various things to ponder and think about let me leave us with those two names again that were given to Jesus Jesus the saviour Jesus Emmanuel God with us may I wish you a very merry Christmas indeed