

Carols by Candlelight

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[0 : 00] Now my aim this morning in these next few minutes is to show us that Christmas is much bigger than we think. And that is because the birth of Jesus Christ is much bigger than we think.

If you've been watching David Attenborough's new wildlife series, Dynasties, then you'll be familiar with the close-up shots as well as the big picture shots.

So there's the close-up as the camera zooms in on one particular pride of lions or one particular animal. And then there's the enormous big picture shot of the whole of the Maasai Mara and its enormous African skies.

Well, we've had the zoom-in detail of Christmas already in our Bible readings, the announcement to Joseph that Mary is pregnant, the birth of Jesus, the visit to the wise men.

And yet we don't get the big picture simply by looking at Jesus as a baby in a manger. Because, of course, a baby is small.

[1 : 04] A baby is containable. We easily miss the significance of who the baby is and what the baby will achieve.

And instead we end up with a kind of Disney-fied version of Christmas, which is all about presents and family celebrations and Christmas trees and food.

I assume it's why regular surveys suggest that Jesus Christ and Christianity is irrelevant for the majority of people in this country.

Because, of course, a small Jesus is one we can just pack up again after the twelfth night and put up in the loft and we don't have to think about him again for another 11 months until Christmas next year.

So what I want to do for the next few minutes is to focus on two verses in the New Testament. I've printed them there on the order of service. This is one of many New Testament passages which moves beyond the historic facts themselves to the significance of those facts.

[2 : 13] And it helps us to grasp a big view of Christmas and a big view of Jesus. And it shows us if we're to have a big view of Christmas, then there are two things we need to understand about ourselves and there are two things we need to understand about Jesus.

Firstly, two things we need to know about ourselves. Have a look at that little reading from Hebrews chapter 9. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.

The word appointed reminds us that we live in God's world and this is the way he has ordered life in his world, that each one of us will die.

2018 has seen a number of famous deaths. Singer Aretha Franklin, actor Burt Reynolds, comedian Dennis Norden, singer Dolores O'Riordan, football World Cup winner Ray Wilson, former MP Tessa Jow, Professor Stephen Hawking, and Sir Roger Bannister, the first person to run the mile in under four minutes.

All of them famous, many of them extraordinary, and yet each one of them has died. When you say, that's not a very cheerful thing, is it to be thinking about at a carol service?

[3 : 36] But you see, the Bible is for realists. It's just what we need in our culture, which is so very unreal about death. At best, we talk about having someone passed away.

At worst, we won't even discuss it because we don't have the answers. A friend of mine was on the tube recently, heading for the airport. She got talking to another passenger who asked where she was going, so she explained that she was going back home to say goodbye to her dying father.

To which the woman replied, Do you know, I've known a number of people who have died recently, but where do they all go? It's a great question, isn't it?

Where do they all go? And yet, we so rarely stop to ask. But then look back at our little reading there, because the second thing we need to know about ourselves is it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes the judgment.

Because death is not the end. The next thing isn't a sort of empty nothingness, but the judgment. Now, we know the judgment is real because Jesus Christ spoke about it.

[4 : 53] He spoke about it more than anyone else in the Bible. It's why, of course, if we've never stopped to ask the question, who was Jesus, then we need to do so.

Because, you see, who is this? Who speaks with such authority? Because if he is God in the flesh, and, of course, that is the claim that he is, then as he warns us about the judgment, as he speaks about the judgment, he does so with knowledge.

And like every warning, it's an act of kindness. Warnings, I take it, are always acts of kindness. As a father of three children, I've lost count the number of times I've had to warn them about things.

And although on a bad day, they tell me I'm being a killjoy, I think on the whole, my warnings come because I love them.

I want them to understand the world in which we live. In the same way, Jesus is not being a killjoy when he tells us about the judgment.

[5 : 58] It is instead a great act of kindness. But as well as being real, judgment is also good. Don't we all want justice?

Don't we all want to live in a world which is just and fair? And yet so often there's precious little justice, isn't there, in this life. You know, the criminal who's never caught, the life sentence which is just a few years, while no sentence, of course, ever really makes things right for the victim.

You see, it may well be that your response to hearing that there is a judgment day is simply to think to yourself, well, you know, we just can't believe in that kind of thing anymore.

But Jesus did. And we're all hardwired to want it. Every time there's news of yet another stabbing in London, don't our hearts cry out for justice.

The alternative is a God who doesn't care, and that is far worse. So then two things about ourselves, death and judgment.

[7 : 14] We may not want to hear them, and yet without them, we are ducking reality. Without them, we won't really make sense of Christianity.

Without them, we won't make sense of life. But then secondly, two things which we need to know about Jesus, because as I read out the verse again, see if you can spot the surprise.

So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Jesus Christ will appear a second time. I said I wanted us to have a big picture view of Christmas, a big picture view of Jesus, and this is about as wide angle, isn't it, as you can guess, that he's going to come again on the final day of history.

So let's just ask, what did Jesus come to do the first time he came, and what will Jesus come and do the second time? As it tells us, the first time he came, that he might be offered once to bear the sins of many.

[8 : 33] When the Bible speaks about sin, it is not speaking about what our culture thinks of when it talks about sin. We equate sin, don't we, with kind of front page of the tabloid newspapers.

It's the worst of what other people get up to. Whereas when the Bible speaks about sin, it's speaking about what all of us are by nature like.

It's the attitude which pushes God to the very edge of my life, or even out of my life altogether. I may still go to church, or I may not.

I may still pray, or I may not. I may be someone who is well regarded by other people, or not. But the fact is that I am the one who runs my life in my own way.

So why did Jesus come the first time? To bear the sins of many. He died on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins, so we can be forgiven our sin, so we can be clean on the inside, so we can be friends with God, so we can stand before God on the final judgment day with a clean conscience.

[9 : 57] I don't know if you watch any of the commemorations on Remembrance Day, 100 years since the end of the First World War. The 83-word telegram that brought peace was typed by Lieutenant Colonel William Dobby.

He was a highly regarded Christian. He went on to serve in the Second World War, and he was later described by Winston Churchill as a most remarkable man.

But when people would, in later life, ask him what he did in the First World War, his reply was always the same. I brought an end to the beastly thing.

And he did. He stopped it. He brought peace, in a sense. Well, in a far greater way, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins brings peace, peace with God for those who trust in Jesus and those who follow him.

So we celebrate in some of the traditional Christmas readings as the angels say to the shepherds, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

[11 : 08] And in some of the best love, Christmas carols, hark the herald, angels sing, glory to the newborn king, peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.

But you say, what is Jesus going to do when he appears the second time? Well, look back at that little reading from Hebrews.

He will appear a second time not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly awaiting for him. Whereas the first time, you see, Jesus came in weakness and insignificance.

The second time, he will appear in great power and glory, completely unmissable, completely unmistakable.

everyone will understand what is happening. And perhaps again, our response is to think, but surely you can't believe this kind of thing in the 21st century.

[12 : 15] And yet Jesus gave proof. After his death on the cross, he rose again from the dead, never to die again. The resurrection of Jesus, for which there is good evidence, is proof there is life beyond the grave.

It is proof that Jesus Christ is now alive. It is the proof we need that he will return a second time. We have some early bloomer daffodils in our garden and they will be a great foretaste of things to come when they bloom in a few weeks' time in the middle of January.

A foretaste, if you like, of a whole new world. Can you imagine that? A new world of sunshine, of colour, of warmth, all the things which we don't experience today.

A signpost that spring is on the way. And in the same way, if you like, Jesus Christ is the early bloomer for resurrection life beyond the grave.

He is a foretaste of what is to come. His return at the end of history will be a glorious day for those who put their trust in him as he takes them to be with him in the new creation, the new heavens, and the new earth.

[13 : 34] So two things we need to know about ourselves and two things we need to know about Jesus if we are to have a bigger view of Christmas that gets beyond the tinsel and the presents and the food and the sales.

Now, I imagine some of us would rather keep Christmas small because it's containable, it's not threatening, it's safe, and for 11 months of the year we can ignore it.

Perhaps others, actually, we do have a big view of Christmas, a view of Christmas that will last far longer than the socks we're going to unwrap on Tuesday or the coffee machine or whatever it is.

A big Christmas with a big Jesus who helps us to face death and eternity with realistic confidence.

Realistic because we're not shying away from death, we're not shying away from judgment. Confidence because we are trusting in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins.

[14 : 47] We've been washed clean on the inside which means we can look forward to his return. It may be, as Rupert was suggesting earlier, there may be some of us who have never really thought about the claims of Jesus or at least not done so as an adult.

If that is the case, we'd love you to sign up and join us for that Christianity Explored that Rupert mentioned. As he said, the tear-off slip is on the order of service there. Just tick the box. Alternatively, we offer a guided one-to-one read-through of one of the Gospels if you'd rather do that rather than meet in a group with other people.

Or perhaps actually you know that you're someone and you've drifted away from Jesus and you've drifted away from Christian faith in which case that Christianity Explored course again would be a great refresher for the new year.

Well, why don't we have a few moments for reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer. And just as it is appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that Jesus Christ enables us to approach life and death and the judgment with great confidence.

[16 : 32] We thank you that he has come into our world as we celebrate his birth at Christmas. We thank you that he came to die on the cross for our sins, for those who trust in him.

And we praise you that he will return in glory and power at the end of history. And we pray, Heavenly Father, please would you help us to hold on to these things and to trust them.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.