

CHRISTMAS DAY - The Unseen God

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the Christmas Day service on 2001. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled The Unseen God and is based on John chapter 1 verses 1 to 18.

Once upon a time there were two explorers exploring the jungle. It was dark under the jungle leaves. The thick canopy of lush large green leaves blocked out much of the hot blazing sun. But to these explorers' surprise, as they made progress through the jungle, they came unexpectedly upon a clearing. A clearing where there were no jungle leaves above and instead of jungle type low foliage, there was a beautiful cottage garden.

Apart from the cottage garden where flowers were out and they were all in neat lines and neat rows, there was no obvious indication of anyone living there, no house or anything like that.

One of the explorers said to the other, there must be a gardener who comes to tend this garden. Otherwise, how could it be so beautiful and so ordered?

[1 : 29] But the other one said, of course, there's no gardener here in the middle of the jungle. It's just a fluke. They disagreed. They argued amongst themselves and in the end, they decided that they'd set up watch.

They pitched their tents to the side of the clearing and decided to watch and wait to see who the gardener was. The only way we can settle our dispute is to keep watch and see the gardener. And they watched and they waited and watched and waited, but no gardener ever appeared. See, I told you there's no gardener, said the sceptical one of the two.

Well, the other one replied, well, perhaps he's an invisible gardener. Perhaps he's been, but we haven't seen him. Okay then, let's test it.

Let's let our dog walk around the garden, because if he's invisible, the dog will still be able to smell him and detect that he's here. So throughout the next day and night and day and night beyond that, the dog roamed the garden.

[2 : 40] But he didn't yelp. He didn't bark. Didn't seem as though he smelt anyone present in the garden at all. So now do you believe me?

The sceptical one said, there's no gardener here. Well, perhaps he's a gardener who cannot be seen, cannot be heard, and cannot be smelt.

So they devised a plan to test. They put around an electric fence, a bit of barbed wire at the top to make it look intimidating. They thought surely if there's a gardener, even if he's invisible and cannot be smelt or heard, he's going to be sensitive to this electric fence around the garden.

And they watched. And they waited. But they heard no shrieks of pain as some invisible gardener came in touch with the electric fence and there was certainly no movement of its wire.

Now, finally, surely you are convinced there's no gardener here at all. It's just a fluke that this beautiful cottage garden exists in the middle of the jungle.

[3 : 50] No, the other one said, I'm not convinced. It may well be that this gardener is invisible. He is silent. He's unsmellable. And he's insensitive to electricity.

But nonetheless, there must surely be a gardener who secretly and unknown to us comes and tends this beautiful garden in the middle of the jungle.

Well, his friend despaired. You might have already despaired by this stage. How does what you call an invisible, intangible, unsmellable, eternally elusive gardener differ from just a figment of your imagination?

Isn't he just an imaginary gardener? Or even perhaps no gardener at all? The only place your gardener exists is in your head. He is purely imaginary.

Well, there's one problem with that story. And the problem with that story is today, Christmas Day. You see, that story was developed by an atheist philosopher called Anthony Flew.

[5 : 04] He tried to refute the existence of God and he used that as one of his illustrations to prove his point. God is imaginary. The figment of people's imaginations.

He cannot be seen. He cannot be heard. He cannot be detected at all in our world. He is unverifiable. He's not there. But the problem is Christmas.

Because at Christmas time, God, the gardener, appeared in human form as Jesus Christ to come and tend the garden that he'd made.

Christmas is when God is seen. A little baby in a manger, growing up to be a boy and then to be a man, walking the roads of Palestine and Israel, touching people, seeing people, doing things, speaking things and so on and then ultimately being seen on the cross.

And then beyond that, being seen in his resurrection appearances before ascending to heaven. Christmas is God being heard.

[6 : 11] Christmas is God being heard. Those little cries of a newborn baby that Warwick and Oliver so eagerly anticipating in the next how many hours?

16 hours due today. Christmas is God being heard. But then as he grows up, speaking words of God's truth, preaching, commanding demons and so on.

And then in the end a desolate cry from the cross before he dies. Christmas is even God being smelled. The smell of dirty nappies in a Bethlehem manger.

The smell of sweat as he walks dusty roads. The smell of blood and sweat mixed together as he dies an agonising death on the cross. You see, the problem with the story is Christmas.

Because at Christmas, God, the gardener, comes in human form. He has seen, he's heard, he's smelled, he's touched. It is God coming out. Now it's true, as Anthony Flew said, and the Bible even says at the end of the second reading today, no one has ever seen God.

[7 : 19] But that does not mean that God is imaginary. That God is figment of our creation. That he's a fictional character. And it's true that no one has ever seen God. But that does not mean that God is mystery.

That he's unknown and unknowable. That he's just remote. And that we have therefore licensed to create God however we want him to be. No one has seen God.

But as that passage finished, God the only Son, Jesus Christ, has made him known. Now if I were to ask you to tell me what is my father like, most of you, if not all of you, have never met my father, I suspect.

You could probably just guess a few things. Well, he's got to be older than I am, for a start. You'd be right there. He's male. That's true. Beyond that, you'd be guessing, I suspect. You might say, well, he's an Australian.

Well, he is, but he wasn't born here. And so on. That is, unless I who know him well tell you something about him or you get to meet him face to face, you don't know very much about my father.

[8 : 27] And I can only reveal to you of him what I know, which is quite a bit, but not everything. Similarly, Jesus and God.

Jesus came to reveal God to us. No one has ever seen God, but God, the only son, Jesus, has made him known. So Jesus being born at Christmastime is to make an unseen God knowable to us, to reveal God to us, to explain to us and reveal what God is like, what his character is like, what his purposes are for this world, for history and humanity.

But more than that, Jesus not only came to tell us about God, but to be God seen in our midst.

If you were to meet my father, you might just think, oh, I think he's related to Paul. Because when I was growing up, people would often say that I look like my father.

I'd say that he looked like me. And I guess if you saw him, you might well agree, especially since I've shaved my beard off this year. Indeed, as someone arrived this morning, Peter's brother, John, I think it was, someone said, oh, you must be Peter's brother, because there's a family likeness there.

[9 : 48] So too with Jesus. Not only does he come to tell us about God, but he actually shows what God is like because of the intimate relationship between Jesus, God's son, and God the Father.

He's not just telling us secondhand what God is like, like some media scoop who's trying to tell us about the inner lives of the great heroes of our world and society, but from a distance and from a lot of ignorance often.

But he knows God intimately. We're told here that it's God, the only son, who is close to the father's heart. He is intimate with God. He knows the deepest, most hidden things about God.

And he comes not just to tell us, but by his life and by his character, by his actions and words, he himself is God in human form, revealing God the Father.

Not just that he looks like God physically, that's not the point of the incarnation, but more to do with the character and purposes of God himself. So if you want to know what God is like, don't fall into the atheist and agnostic trap of Antony Flew and think that God is just unseen and therefore unverifiable and therefore a figment of imagination or non-existent.

[11 : 07] Look to Jesus to see what God is like. That purity, that perfection of God's character, look to Jesus to see it being demonstrated in human form.

If you want to see the love of God, or if you doubt that God who's remote and unseen can ever love you, look to Jesus to see the love of God being demonstrated in words of tenderness and compassion, in acts of healing and kindness, but above all in dying for us on the cross.

If you want to see the mercy of God, if you want to see the forgiveness, that though he's holy yet he forgives sinners, look to Jesus dying on a cross for our sins, so that we can have a relationship with God established by him.

If you want to see the faithfulness of God to his promises, if you doubt that what God says he's ever going to do and fulfil, look to Jesus. He is the fulfilment of all of God's promises.

Indeed, the first reading was one of God's promises that he'd send a Messiah. It occurred 750 years before Jesus was born. But when Jesus came, he showed that God is faithful to everything he says.

[12 : 21] If you want to see the purposes of God for you, for your life, for eternity, for this world, has God got your best interests at heart? Is he looking after you? Is he providing for you?

Look to Jesus to see God doing exactly that, bringing about the fulfilment of his good purposes for us and this world. No one has ever seen God.

It is God, the only Son, that is Jesus Christ, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. For as that passage from John's Gospel said a bit earlier, the Word, that is Jesus, became flesh and lived among us.

And we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. God, full of glory, revealed in Jesus, full of glory.

God, full of grace, revealed in Jesus, full of grace. God, full of truth, revealed in Jesus, full of truth. So if then God has revealed himself to us in his Son, Jesus Christ, the ball's in our court.

[13 : 29] It's not for us to say, well, God's just hidden himself, it's up to God now to do something. He's done it. The ball's in our court. How are we going to respond to a God who's revealed himself, his character and his purposes so clearly in Jesus Christ?

He's spoken. How will we reply and respond? Will we ignore him or follow him? Heed him or disregard him?

Astonishingly, when Jesus came, tragically indeed, when Jesus came, people by and large did not accept him. They did not receive him. They dismissed him.

They scorned him. And they killed him. People today often say to me, oh, seeing is believing. If God's going to be believed, then he's got to do something.

He's got to show his hand so that I'll believe. He's done it and they didn't. He was seen. But by and large, people didn't believe him.

[14 : 32] And we're no different. If Jesus came again today in human form, visibly manifesting the glory of God, people would no more believe than they did 2,000 years ago. He came to his own people, but his own people did not receive him.

That passage from John's Gospel said earlier. But the glorious promise of Christmas is that for those who do receive him, for those who believe in his name, who trust in Jesus Christ, God gives them power to become children of God.

You see, we're not children of God because we're human. We're not children of God because we're born into this earth. The privilege of being a child of God is reserved for those who trust in Jesus, God in flesh.

The atheists of this world have got it wrong. And Christmas is their downfall. God has come. God has been seen. God has been heard.

God has been smelled. God has been touched. Christmas is their problem. Because God is not a figment of imagination like Harry Potter or Middle Earth.

[15 : 44] He's real. And because God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, we're not free to make God who we want. Because often our mistake is to think, well, I like to think of God being like this or like this.

We don't have that license. God is who he is. And he's revealed himself in Jesus Christ. The ball's in our court.

We must make sure that we receive him and believe in his name and then enjoy the great privilege of being a child of God. Amen.