

God With Us

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Preacher: Phil Meulman

[0 : 00] This is the late evening service at Holy Trinity on the 24th of December 2000.

The preacher is Phil Muleman. His subject is entitled God with us and is from Matthew chapter 1 verses 18 to 25.

Our Father, we thank you for this day in which we celebrate the birth of our Saviour. Lord, we pray that your word may be as relevant today as it has been in the centuries gone by. Amen.

I would assume that almost everybody here has a Christmas tree by now set up in their home. If you haven't, you've probably had a tree in your home at some point in your life.

Some have real trees, others have fake trees just like we have here. It all depends on your family tradition. The tradition of a friend of mine is to not only get a real tree, but to get the biggest tree that they can find.

[1 : 17] And when you go into their house, you feel like that you have just walked into a forest. It's massive, this tree which is there full of decorations and so on.

Now, not only do you probably have a tree in your house, but you've probably got piles and piles of gifts by now under your tree as well. Now, growing up, my parents would put some of those gifts under the tree just to tease us kids.

I was the youngest of four. But the big presents, the ones that we were really looking forward to, would be hidden away cleverly by mum and dad somewhere.

At least they thought they were hidden. And every year, when mum and dad were away from the house, I would go on a hunt and I would find my gifts.

But mum and dad, alas, they're smarter than I thought. They started catching on. So they started hiding my presents and my gifts at my neighbour's house. I knew that too.

[2 : 26] But for the gifts that were put under the tree, go back to those under the tree, okay, I used to open those that were meant for me. I was a master at pulling the sticky tape off and then resealing them after I had seen what was inside the wrapping paper.

Put your hands up if you did that. There's one. So with all the knowledge of everything I was going to get, it meant that I had to act surprised on Christmas morning when I was allowed to open my gifts.

Well, for any child and for any adult, an exciting part of the Christmas holidays is the gift giving, isn't it? And also the gift receiving.

To see those gifts under the tree, to know that some are for you and that some are from you. And the anticipation of unwrapping that gift and seeing what somebody has got for you.

The excitement of seeing someone unwrap a gift that you brought and seeing their expression of joy. It's a wonderful part of Christmas, isn't it?

[3 : 34] Giving the gifts. Last week I spoke about the negative parts of Christmas and giving out gifts, but really it is a wonderful part of Christmas giving out gifts. Almost every gift given at Christmas is wrapped with beautiful paper and perhaps a bow, such as this present that I have here, which I'm going to give out later on.

And we take pride in the presentation of the gift, knowing that it really is an expression of our love for the person that we are giving it to. Whether it be a child's gift from the school fair, where they buy you some little soap things or something like that, or through to a spouse's gift that you have picked out with enduring love.

And the gift that we give is a small token, a tiny expression of the love that motivates the giving of the gift. I guess you can say the greatest gifts given are the ones given with love.

And so we read about the gift given to the world on Christmas morning. Instead of giving it under a tree, it was given in a manger.

Instead of a gift wrapped in paper, it was wrapped in cloth. Instead of a gift opened at home, it was a gift delivered in a stable in Bethlehem.

[4 : 59] A few minutes ago we heard from the Bible, God's Word, about one of the best known stories of human history. And that's the story from Matthew's Gospel, which is read to us.

The story about the birth, or a part of the birth, of Jesus Christ. An extraordinary gift given to us by God. But for Joseph and for Mary, they were thinking it was a gift they would like to return, or perhaps at least exchange.

I mean, let's think about it. Joseph receives the shocking news that his wife-to-be is pregnant, and he is not the father. Which makes Mary, well, it makes Mary something he doesn't want to marry. Sure, the angels assured Joseph in a dream that Mary is actually a virgin, that she hadn't been sleeping around, and that all that she said was true.

But try telling that to the village people. Try telling that to the people that he worked with, that he socialised with, that he went to the synagogue with, or to the temple with. Now, news travels fast these days in Doncaster, and my guess is it travelled fairly fast, as fast in Nazareth.

[6 : 19] There would have been a lot of gossip going on around that time. And poor Mary. The last thing a nine-month pregnant woman wants to do is travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, 70 miles or something, on the back of a donkey.

And with a pregnant woman who has to go to the bathroom every five minutes, it must have taken twice as long. And to make matters worse, when the labour pains kicked in, where would she deliver?

Where would she deliver? But in a strange place, with animals surrounding her, not other babies, not other mothers, animals surrounding her. The way this gift was wrapped, I think Mary and Joseph were ready for a refund.

Ah, but when the gift was delivered, everything changed. When the gift finally came, when the baby was finally born, Joseph and Mary forgot about the donkey ride, they forgot about the gossips and talk behind their back, they didn't even notice that their child would spend their first night in an animal feeding trough with cow dung not far off.

The gift, which seemed so unexpected and unreasonable at first, now became invaluable. And what was the gift?

[7 : 55] Sure, it was Jesus. We're smart enough to realise that, aren't we? But more than that, what was the gift that God gave to not only Joseph and Mary, but to the entire world?

What was the gift God decided to give to the world 2,000 years ago on the first Christmas morning when Jesus was born? Well, it was a gift given in response to a feeling that we all have from time to time.

Now, in a conversation I had with a person some time ago, they expressed some difficult times that the whole family was going through. Some trying times that were weighing down on all of them. And in a moment of what I would call transparency and honesty, they said, I feel like my life is in chaos or turmoil. My guess is, this person is not alone.

If each one of us were that transparent and honest, we could all say that we know how that feels. We've all felt like our life was in turmoil and chaos at some stage.

[9 : 13] Maybe, just maybe, you feel that way tonight. Now, I don't know why this is, but it always seems like the holidays, especially these holidays, causes turmoil for people more than any other time of the year.

It's ironic, isn't it? The season where we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Saviour of the world, is the season we experience the most turmoil, the most stress, and the most pressure.

It's not supposed to be that way. But we all know that feeling, that feeling of turmoil, when the world seems to be crashing in on you, when things seem out of control, when the heartache is too much to bear, the addiction too hard to overcome, the sin too great to forgive.

We all know that feeling of bitterness, of anger, of hostility towards other people, even, dare I say it, family. We all know that sense of loss, that sense of loneliness, that sense of depression.

We've all felt that crunch of worry. Worry about the kids. Worry about money. Worry about what our future will bring.

[10 : 40] We've all dealt with that illusion that says, too much to do, and so little time to do it in. I am an extreme case.

We've all suffered through that feeling of turmoil, haven't we? Ultimately, what we are asking in those moments, the question we are seeking an answer to so often is, where is God? Where is he in this world? Where is he on this earth? Where is God in my life? Where is he? That is the ultimate question, isn't it? It's a question that has been asked through the ages. Even though God promised to Abraham, as we heard in the first reading, that he will be with his people, and God is the God who keeps his promises, his people still ask the question, where is God? The prophet Isaiah, about 700 years before Christ was born, assured them of God's presence, assured God's people of God's presence. He says in Isaiah, at the end of this reading that was read tonight, the Lord himself will give you a sign.

[12:00] Look, the young woman, that is a virgin, is with child, and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel. Poor Joseph and Mary, they too must have wondered where God was.

In the midst of the confusion, in the midst of the rough journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, in the midst of a strange place, they wondered, I am sure, to themselves, where is God?

And now, 2,000 years later, we are still asking the same question, hoping to get an answer. Even those of us who are long-time Christians wonder where he is sometimes.

Even those who have never stepped foot into a church wonder where God is. There is an island in the Pacific Ocean called Molokai, and it has quite a history.

You have to go way back to the late 1800s to understand this island's significance. You see, back then, there was no cure for the highly mutilating and deadly disease called leprosy, a disease that would attack the extremities of the bodies, the ears, the toes, the nose, and the fingers.

[13:27] A horrible, dreadful disease, which today is curable. But back in the 1800s, it wasn't. Now, in order to keep the disease at bay, in order to keep it from spreading and creating an epidemic, the government would send lepers to a colony on the island of Molokai where they would be secluded and isolated from those who were not infected with this disease.

Well, in 1873, there was a Catholic priest, a young Catholic priest named Father Damien who volunteered to spend his life serving the people secluded on the island of Molokai.

When he arrived, he was startled to see people who were not only suffering physically but socially and emotionally and spiritually. In the leper colony, he saw extreme drunkenness, immorality, abuse and an overall sense of hopelessness.

What he saw were people who desperately needed to know the answer to a question that we all ask, where is God? And they needed God's presence in their life.

And so, in 1873, aware of the dangers and risks of contracting leprosy from such close contact with these people, Father Damien lived among this leper colony, these 700 lepers.

[14:58] He built hospitals, clinics and churches and built some 600 coffins. And the whole while, he was giving them the answer to that question, where is God?

He was telling people about God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ. Now, whenever a church service was held, he would stand up in front of the lepers and he would warmly and lovingly address them, my dear brethren.

But then one morning in 1885, at the age of 45, in a calm, clear voice, instead of, my dear brethren, he began with the words, my fellow lepers, I am one of you now.

You see, it was out of love that this humble priest became one of them. Out of love, he gave these lepers a gift that would change their life for all of eternity.

He shared with them the answer to the ever-present question, where is God? And the only way he could give them the answer is in a sense by becoming one of them.

[16:16] And friends, so it is with God. He wants all of us to be aware of the answer to that question, where is God? In the busyness of holidays, in the rush of shopping, in the midst of despair and loneliness, in the middle of turmoil that we all face from time to time, God wants us all to be aware of the gift that he has given to the world.

A gift he gave by becoming one of us. God became a human. He took on our sicknesses, he took on our disease, he took on our sin and died on a cross so that our sin could be taken away and that we might live.

And in doing so, he ultimately and eternally answered the question that plagues all of humanity, where is God?

God is with us. That is the gift of Christmas. A gift that we can accept or refuse.

The gift of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, which means God with us. may you know God's peace and gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord this Christmas and evermore.
[17 : 49] Amen.