

CHRISTMAS DAY - God Unwrapped

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[0 : 00] Oh, isn't that rain wonderful? Mmm, what a blessing. What a blessing to wake up on Christmas morning to a wet ground.

During the week I experienced another blessing, a Christmas miracle, if you will. I got a car park on Chapel Street in South Yarra. Normally I wouldn't even dream of doing Christmas shopping there, but because I'm such a good wife, I went there to get a particular book that my dear husband Phil had requested, and I could only get this book from Borders in South Yarra.

And Phil's hard to buy for, so when you find something, you've got to go for it. I wonder if you've got people like that in your family. Well, anyway, being a minister, when I'm in Borders, I usually check out the spirituality section, you know, just to see what's out there at the moment.

And as I thought about the range on the shelves, you know, the latest from the Dalai Lama, some cute Max Licato stories, books debunking the Da Vinci Code again, still, and a series of books claiming to be conversations with God, I began to imagine hundreds of people around Melbourne being given these books for Christmas, in fact, unwrapping them this very morning.

And it's not that unlikely. After all, studies show that Australians are becoming more spiritually minded year by year. Religion is definitely on the radar.

[1 : 38] Many of us are seeking after God, or at least we're wanting to know if he warrants all the attention that the politicians and those enthusiasts up at Hillsong are giving him.

But if everyone did get a book from the spirituality section for Christmas, what sort of a picture of God would they be unwrapping this morning?

I guess one person might unwrap a picture of God from the traditions of Tibet. Another, a God that promises that he's inside each of us, so long as we're willing to think positively and seize the day and perhaps by the next instalment of that book by that particular author.

Quite a few people might read that if God does exist, he can never be known as he truly is. And so our best guesstimates about him are good enough.

After all, even the Bible says that God is invisible. So how can we know exactly what he is like? Perhaps God can't really be unwrapped at all.

[2 : 48] The Bible is clear that God is beyond our human senses. The first part of verse 18 in our passage from John's Gospel, which you might want to have open, are on page 862.

The first part of verse 18 says, No one has ever seen God. Other parts of the New Testament also tell us that God is immortal, invisible, dwelling in unapproachable light.

He is inaccessible to our human senses as he is, because in his holiness, he is far beyond our mortal comprehension.

And yet the Bible also says that we can get an idea of what God is like from what he has made. Psalm 19 says, The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech, night after night they display knowledge. We can get clues about God's character, his mind, his heart, from things like the vastness of the ocean, the intricacy of an orchid, the overwhelming love of a parent for a new baby.

[4 : 06] But it's kind of like guessing what a Christmas present is by its shape when it's under the tree. I am particularly good at this, or particularly persistent, and so persistent that Phil has to hide the presents that he's bought for me in his car and take away my key to that car so that I don't go searching and guessing and finding.

But say, even if it's obvious to me that it's a DVD, I still can't be certain what the movie is until I unwrap it, and then even until I watch it.

In a similar way, there are limits on what we can discover about the invisible God in creation. And even when we do see his shape, we have a great tendency as human beings to distort that

message or reject it.

Perhaps that's why the spirituality section in Borders is so big. So if God wants to be known by us, if the one true God wants each of us to unwrap him, not as a guesstimate, but as he truly is this Christmas, then perhaps what he needs is the spiritual equivalent of Star Trek's Universal Translator.

If you're not nerdy enough to know already, the Universal Translator is the futuristic technological device that enables every alien, no matter what planet they come from, to be heard by the crew of the Starship Enterprise to be speaking English with an American accent.

[5 : 52] If God wants to be understood, seen and known by us, then God needs to express himself clearly and simply in a language that each of us can understand.

every human born on this planet can understand. He needs to translate himself into the language of human life.

That is, of course, exactly what God has done, friends, by becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ. Many of you hear this truth Christmas morning, year in, year out.

But can I encourage you to just pause once again to take in the enormity of it. The invisible God, the glorious one who is far beyond our reach and our understanding, this God, has desired so greatly to be known and understood by us that he has unwrapped himself in a way that each human being who is ever born can understand.

Verse 18 in its entirety says this, No one has ever seen God. It is God, the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

[7 : 21] This is the message of Christmas. If you, like so many, often feel that if God exists at all, then he is silent and invisible, the message of Christmas is believe that no longer.

God, the only Son, Jesus Christ, has made him both audible and visible. You see, in verse 1 in this passage, John says that Jesus is the word of God, that he is the one that makes God audible.

Just as God spoke the creation into being in the beginning of time as his self-expression, Jesus Christ is God's word of self-expression that reveals God exactly.

He was in the beginning, before all created things. He was with God. And John says, he was God. If you want to know what God thinks about us, about this world, about your joys, sorrows, pains, listen to Jesus.

He makes God audible. Pick up a Bible and read the words of Jesus. If you want to be confident that they have been accurately recorded and faithfully transmitted down the centuries, talk to me afterwards.

[8 : 50] I'll be happy to point you in the right direction of some great evidence. In Jesus, God is silent no longer. Jesus is the word that makes God audible.

And God is invisible no longer because Jesus is the light that makes God visible. Notice in verses 5 and 9, if you've got the passage open, John speaks of Jesus as the light that comes into the world and shines in the darkness.

Jesus brings God into focus. When we look at Jesus in the passage of the Bible, we see the glory of God in his character, his actions, his teaching, his sacrificial love.

We see a man who would reach out and touch a contagious leper and yet who would not put up with the sickness of religious hypocrisy.

And there we see the God of compassion and holiness. We see a man who could calm a storm, who could feed thousands from a few loaves of bread.

[10 : 05] and yet who would not turn away the smallest child. And so we see the God of power and tenderness.

We see a man who would hang out with society's outcasts and yet who would die for the sins of both outcast and power broker as he hung on the cross.

And so we see in Jesus the God who is both just and merciful. As our reading from Hebrews this morning said, Jesus is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.

When we look at Jesus, we see God himself. Jesus himself made that crystal clear when a disciple called Philip said to him, Lord, show us the Father, God, and we will be satisfied.

John said to him, Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

[11 : 24] Because of Christmas, God is invisible no longer. Jesus the light has made him known. Because of Christmas, God is silent no longer.

Jesus the word has made him audible. God is unwrapped for us in Jesus Christ. But God never intended this revelation of himself to be just an academic exercise.

He's not going to be administering an exam at the pearly gates. That's not what he's on about. He wants to be known personally.

If you've got the passage open, look how John the gospel writer communicates this. Firstly, he changes pronouns. At the beginning of the passage, it's all third person, isn't it?

He, him, the word, the light. These are the facts. But see how the pronouns change in verse 14 and verse 16.

[12:33] And the word 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.

from his fullness, we have all received grace upon grace. Suddenly, God's grace and truth is not in the third person.

It's in the first person. And it's plural. This is personal. And it's for each one of us. God can not only be known about, he can be known in relationship.

And he wants to be known by you, by me, by us. Perhaps more striking than the pronouns are the two verbs that are applied to us in these verses.

The first is in verse 14. Seen. We have seen his glory. Because he became human, born as a baby, grew up as a man and lived among us, God in all his glory is unwrapped for you and I to see today and every day.

[13:51] The Bible is not meant to be just another book sitting alongside others in the spirituality section in borders or in that kind of bit of our bookshelf. It is the inspired and living word of God about the word himself, Jesus.

God's spirit breathed through the pages of this book and God's spirit touches our heart and opens our eyes to see God when we read it.

But the second verb here is perhaps an even greater challenge for us this morning. It is the word received. From his fullness we have all received.

Grace upon grace. Have you ever given a present to someone only to have them unwrap it and then leave it at your house? I have and you kind of get the idea that it wasn't a super memorable present for them.

Jesus isn't meant to be a present unwrapped but left at Christmas time each year in carols and sentiment.

[15:04] He is meant to be received, embraced, taken into every part of our lives. When God unwraps himself for us, it's about receiving grace.

He wants us simply to say, thank you. I recognize that this gift is for me. That Jesus was born to reveal a holy and merciful God to me.

To reveal my need of forgiveness. To bring me into an eternal relationship with the one who made me.

Jesus is grace and truth and I accept this truth and I want this grace, Lord. I know I need this. I need, I accept your generosity.

I receive your gift. And what does John chapter 1 verse 11 say?

[16:12] Verse 12, but to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. God. Some gifts are not easy to receive.

They require us to make some space, maybe in our kitchen, on the kitchen bench for another appliance. Space in our homes, space in our lives.

Some gifts require us to change our mindset. Can I go from using a diary to a PDA? today? Some gifts require us to overcome our pride.

But if God is truly unwrapped for us in Jesus, can we do anything but receive him? The invisible God is now visible.

The silent God is now audible. He has come, speaking the language of human life so that we can truly know him as he is.

[17:20] But more than that, he has come to us because he longs for us to receive him, to live in relationship with him, to talk to him daily, because he loves us and his heart is generous toward us.

So can I encourage you on this beautiful, wet Christmas morning, don't leave the gift of Jesus unwrapped before you any longer. don't hold him at arm's length anymore.

Receive Jesus as your Lord and God. If you already have, then thank God for it. Get to know him even more.

Share that gift with others. At Christmas, let's continue to receive Jesus as God unwrapped and our Christmases will never be the same again.

Thank you.