

Still the Best Good News

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Date: 25 December 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Well, again, can I say Merry Christmas to you all and also to those people watching online. We are streaming this service. Before you all panic and start to do your hair, especially at the back of your heads, don't worry, they can't see you.

The cameras are down this end. I wonder though, what's the best good news you've heard this year? Perhaps it's that this terrible year is almost over.

In fact, Time magazine called it on the next slide, 2020, it's in the small print down the bottom, the worst year ever. I'm not sure that's quite true. I mean, 1.7 million people have sadly died from COVID.

The Spanish flu of 1919 took 50 million, World War I, World War II. But either way, COVID isn't really over yet, is it? And so the end of 2020 is only sort of good news.

Or perhaps it was the news that we don't have to wear masks as much as we did, though we still have to wear them in certain places, don't we?

[1 : 0 8] And so that's only sort of good news. Or perhaps it's the good news of holidays, which I love that news, although I'm not quite there yet.

But for me, we had to cancel our plans to go to Sydney along with many others. And so it's not quite good news. It's sort of good news, isn't it? It seems whatever good news we've had, it turns out to be sort of good news.

Good news for some, but not for others. Yet I want to suggest there is some good news that remains good news for all. It's the news announced that very first Christmas to those certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay, as we just sung.

I want to suggest that this is still the best good news we'll hear. Why? Well, because it's reliable news, it's global news, and it's saving news.

And reliable news needs to be reliable, otherwise you can't trust that it's good, can you? In fact, the news agency said earlier this year on the next slide that, in fact earlier, I think it was last month, that this year is the year of fake news.

[2 : 1 8] There's more and more of it going around. But the news announced by the angels is real and reliable. How do we know? Well, because it's grounded in history.

If you've got your sheets of paper there, have a look at the first couple of paragraphs that Luke, our writer, begins with. He says, He says, Did you notice all the names Luke gives us in those two paragraphs?

Here are real people and real places. So verse 1, you've got Augustus, who was the Roman emperor or Caesar of the day. And the history books tell us about him and the fact that he loved his censuses or censai or whatever the plural is.

I can't work it out. But he loved it. We've got other books that back up this fact. Or verse 4, look at all the real places Luke lists. Nazareth, Galilee, Judea, Bethlehem, all of which you can still visit today.

Oh, once international travel begins, of course. Luke also mentions David's name several times in our passage. Because he also wants us to know that Jesus is from King David's family line.

[4 : 04] Jesus is the king, God's chosen king. But the point is, this event is grounded in history. Which, as we've heard before, Luke, why Luke doesn't start with once upon a time or in a galaxy far, far away.

He starts with all this historical detail. It's grounded in history. It's real. And what's more, it was witnessed by people like those shepherds who could be interviewed and cross-examined.

Not today, of course, but they could have been and would have been in that day. And yet, Luke's account has survived. Of course, some people might say, well, hang on a second.

There's a whole bunch of angels that turn up in this reading. Surely angels make it a fairy tale. But if Jesus' birth is no ordinary birth, then shouldn't we expect no ordinary thing to happen like angels?

I mean, if Jesus' birth is supernaturally God the Son coming into the world as a human, shouldn't we expect something supernatural? I think the angels actually lend credibility to this being special.

[5 : 16] In fact, if there was nothing supernatural out of the ordinary, then it'd actually be harder to believe his birth was special. But you see, these historical details, these eyewitnesses, even the angels, all help us to know that this is real and reliable news.

And second, it's global news. Have a look at verses 8 to 10. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them. The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified, as would we be.

But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. This news is for all people.

Which by the ends of Luke's gospel means all nations, the world. This good news is global news. I recently have heard the good news of a couple of vaccines which have been developed, which sounds great news to me.

They're both starting to be administered in the UK and the US, which is good news, as I said. But it's actually not good news for all the people. Because on the next slide, the Pfizer vaccine at least, is there's been reactions, severe reactions with those who have allergies.

[6 : 30] And so at the moment, they're being warned off it for the time being. What's more, while developed countries like the UK and the US are getting these vaccines, I have not heard one thing about what will happen to the poorer countries.

Have you? So the news of a vaccine isn't really good news for all people, is it? Or I heard earlier this month a good news story about a lady named Jacqueline was rushing to see her mother in an aged care home.

She hadn't seen her mother for a long time because of the COVID lockdown. And she had to pre-book a 30-minute window before she could see her mother in.

But in her rush, she was in a bit of a flap as she caught the wrong bus, which was going in the opposite direction. And when it dawned on her, she broke down in tears. And she just asked the bus driver to confirm, you know, is this actually the wrong bus going to this wrong direction?

And to which the bus driver said yes. And this is the bus driver on the next slide, Alex Bailey. And then he asked why. And she told him the reason. He pulled over, stopped the bus, got up and asked all the other passengers if they'd mind taking a detour, then drove her straight to her mother's aged care home so she could get her 30-minute window.

[7 : 49] Isn't that a good news story? But as good as that good news story makes us feel, it's actually not really for us. It wasn't my mother or father.

It wasn't ours. But this good news is for us, for all people, us here in Melbourne too. So this good news is reliable, it's global, and thirdly, it's saving.

Have a look at verse 11 and 12. Today, says the angel in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you. He is the Christ, the Lord.

This will be a sign to you, you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. You see, this good news is about a saviour. And not any old saviour, but the Christ.

Christ. Now, as you know, the word Christ means anointed one or the king. God's chosen king. Christ is a title like doctor or professor, which means king.

[8 : 50] And that's why it says Christ the Lord, the king. And so it's not any old saviour. It's the king who has the power to actually save.

From discord, death and despair, for peace, life and hope. For those who saw our Carols at Home video last week, I mentioned that there is actually a virus in the world that is worse than COVID.

It's called sin. And we've all got it. Because we've all ignored God at times in our lives. Lived our way instead of his way, which is what sin is.

And it creates discord between us and God. I mean, if someone ignores you and rejects you and lives in a way that hurts you, then you're not likely to be at peace with them, are you?

There's going to be discord between you, isn't there? Well, so too, between us and God. And that may not sound all that bad, but discord with God means an eternity without God.

[10 : 00] What the Bible actually calls hell. And if you've ever heard of Jesus speak about hell, you'll know it's no barbecue with your mates. This is why sin is worse than COVID.

But the good news is that there is a saviour born who can save us from it. From discord to peace with God.

And that's why the angels sing in your readings there, verse 13 and 14, if you have a look there, when the great company of heavenly hosts appear with the angel praising God and saying, glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth.

What is it? Peace to those on whom his favour rests. You see, as many of you know, this child would grow up to die on a cross, to pay for our sins, to suffer hell in our place.

So we instead can be forgiven, reconciled, peace with God. As our next carol will put it, peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.

[11 : 12] No longer enemies, no longer discord. In fact, not even just friends. More than that, God makes us family.

Which means God becomes our heavenly father to help us through life's ups and downs. But this good news actually gets better for this peace with God comes with the guarantee of life from death.

Our heavenly father will not let death have the final say for his family. No way. No, he will bring us home through death to life again with him.

And on the last day, he'll raise our physical bodies to be perfect bodies, to enjoy life eternal in a COVID free creation. You see, this saviour saves us from discord to peace, from death to life.

And that, but they both mean he also saves us from despair to hope. Because if you have God as your father, to help you through life's ups and downs, and if you have the guarantee of life after death, then no matter how bad this world gets, there is always hope to dispel the despair.

[12 : 30] Last week, I conducted a funeral for one of our church members. I saw him in the hospital the week before. In fact, it was just a few days before he passed. And we had this conversation, and he said he didn't fear death.

Instead, he said, I'm looking forward to being with my Lord and my fellow Holy Trinity Doncastians. I'd heard that last phrase before. And we were even able to share some jokes together about death.

We spoke about one of his friends who's a bit of a joker. His friend wanted to put a phone in the coffin, and then ring it during the funeral, and then say, oh, sorry everyone, he can't come to the phone right now, he's flat out.

I'm so thankful he didn't do that. But the point is, this church member did not despair, even to the point of being able to make jokes and have a laugh about it.

Unlike others I've seen, and buried, who did despair at their disease and pending death, yet this good news is that Jesus can save us from all that.

[13 : 41] From discord, death, and despair, for peace, life, and certain hope. This is saving news.

Time magazine also recently named the person of the year for 2020. And look who it is on the next slide. It's two people, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris.

Now, despite the fact that time doesn't seem to know that person means one, not two, Joe Biden hasn't, I mean, I'm sure he's a nice guy, but he hasn't done much yet, has he?

And yet time magazine has held him up as the savior of the states. But this good news tells us that Jesus has actually done much more.

And he is the savior of the world. By his death, he saves all who trust in him.

[14 : 38] You see, this is reliable news. It's global news. It's saving news. And it's what makes this news still the best news we'll hear. And so how will you respond this morning?

The shepherds actually give us some clues. Have a look at verse 15 and 16 in your sheets. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

And so they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger. Now it's the first response here. The shepherds go and see for themselves.

They check it out to see if it's true, if they can believe it. For this news is worth seeing. And when they did see at the end of verse 20, we're told that they found things just as they had been told.

There was a baby born in a manger, which remember was unusual for back then as well, right? A manger was a feeding trough for animals. It would be like us coming home from hospital and saying, oh, where are we going to put baby Johnny?

[15 : 50] Oh, the dog bowl looks about right. Let's put him there. I mean, you wouldn't do that, would you? It was, it's unusual to say the least. It's why it was a sign to the shepherds back in verse 12, that they had the right baby because they would find it in this unusual cradle.

But the point is, this news is worth seeing for yourself. And so if you're here today or if you're watching online and you're not yet a Christian, then why not see for yourself?

Investigate the evidence. Or keep reading the rest of Luke's account of Jesus. I have copies of Luke's gospel free for you if you'd like to take one. I'll be at the front door after the service.

For this good news is worth seeing, but it's also worth sharing. That's the next response. Have a look at verse 17 to 18. When the shepherds had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.

And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. You see, this good news is so good that it's worth sharing. It's why we work so hard and spend a fair bit of money, actually producing those carols at home bags and put it on the online as well, to give people at our church an opportunity to share it with their family and neighbors and friends.

[17 : 17] It's why if you give Christmas cards to work colleagues or relatives or neighbors, it's worth making the trip not to Coles, but to this Christian store called Coorong or something and getting Christian cards that just say a little bit, point them to this good news.

After all, it is good news for all the people, isn't it? And finally, it's good news worth praising. Have a look at the last two verses there. Verse 19. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Here, Mary ponders and the shepherds praise, don't they? After all, remember on the next slide, this is good news of great joy.

It's worth praising God for. But I also know for many of us who have been Christians for a while and who have been coming to Christmas services year after year, this good news can become so familiar to us that we can take it for granted and forget just how good it is, can't we?

[18 : 30] In fact, we often do that with all sorts of things. Even COVID. I heard someone say that the outbreak in New South Wales was a bit of a wake-up call for us in Victoria because we had started to become complacent and too familiar with it.

But we can do that with this good news too, can't we? So why not do as Mary did and pause and ponder? In fact, why don't you ponder what you would lose without this good news?

Well, let's see, we'd lose peace. We'd lose life eternal. We'd lose any certain hope that we might have in this life because all other hope is up and down.

This year's taught us that. And with it, we'd lose joy and hardship, assurance. You'd lose a fair bit, wouldn't you? It doesn't take long to see how good this news still is.

And so why not ponder it afresh yourselves today? Not just here at the moment, but, you know, when you go home. Ponder as Mary did that you might praise God as the shepherds did. As I suggested a couple of weeks ago, as you sit down to Christmas dinner or, in my case, Christmas lunch, I can almost smell my lamb roast.

[19 : 49] Why not pause and ponder? Praise God, not just for the food and those who made it. Thank you, wifey, wherever you are. But why not pause and ponder this good news and praise God for Jesus, this saviour, king of ours.

For this news is reliable, it's global, and it's saving news. It's still the best news you'll ever hear. Let's pray.

Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you so much for this good news that was announced that very first Christmas. Father, we thank you that it is reliable, that it's global, and that it is saving news, all of which makes it still the best news we'll ever hear.

Help us, Father, we pray to respond as the shepherds did, to see for ourselves, to share it as we can, and to praise you for it, and for your son, who was born that very first Christmas day.

For we ask it all in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.