

Sunday 14th December 2025 - Advent: Good News of Great Joy

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Date: 14 December 2025

Preacher: Ian McKeown

- [0 : 00] Well, only 11 more sleeps till Christmas. I wonder, has it been a chilled out, relaxed, blissful lead up to Christmas for you so far?
- ! Are you ready for Christmas?
- Yeah, and I'm never quite sure what to say to that. I sort of have to think about it. I just wonder if it might be easier for everyone involved if they just had a tick box questionnaire on the screen to complete as you left the supermarket.
- You know, not really getting there and pretty much done and dusted. I wonder which one you'd tick. You know, maybe not really.
- And that could be out of choice, of course. You know, I'm just trying not to think about it too much. Or getting there. Yeah, probably most of us there. And pretty much done and dusted.
- [1 : 13] Now that takes some pretty serious discipline and preparation, doesn't it? Presents all wrapped by November. You know, obviously not Santa's.
- Just out of interest, anyone here done that? October or November wrapping of present. Legend. Wonderful, yeah. You might just want to keep that to yourself though, you know.
- Makes the rest of us all look bad, doesn't it? Well, wherever you are at, I think it's fair to say, whilst it is of course a very special time of year with family and with friends, as we celebrate the birth of Jesus and light coming into the world, it can also be a very stressful time of year with all the preparations and the visits and the presents and the food shopping to do.
- And of course, not forgetting putting up the Christmas decorations and lights. Not my favourite, okay? And whilst we're on this topic, I don't know about you, but I do think you can go too far with this.
- I mean, really? At some point, you're just going to give those plug sockets a rest, haven't you? You've got to wonder, haven't you, what the next door neighbour makes of all of this.
- [2 : 31] Apparently, there is a designated term for this. It's called OCD. Does anyone come across that? Obsessive Christmas disorder. Now, I don't know if you can see, because it's not very big up on there, but just in the corner on the right-hand side there, there's a poor fella at the end there, and he looks like he's having trouble actually finding his own front door.
- Now, I know that this is a bit extreme. And if it's not, this is me apologising to you. You know, you knock yourself out with your Christmas lights if that's what you want to go for.
- But I wonder sometimes if our expectations of what it means to have the perfect just-so Christmas and the reality actually, you know, match up.
- You know, flawless decorations, picture-perfect meals, a roaring log fire with a bag of chestnuts at the side, and of course, harmonious gatherings where everybody's laughing and getting along.

You know, not that there's anything wrong with any of those things, of course. But it sets this impossibly high benchmark that can just set us up, I think, for failure when Christmas doesn't live up to that.

[3 : 49] And these idealised versions of the perfect, you know, just-so Christmas often get kind of obviously reinforced with a lot of the adverts that we get on TV.

And they are adverts, aren't they? So if you want the perfect Christmas, of course, you have to get the perfect gift. Other retail outlets are available. But to be fair, I think, you know, the Keira Knightley one, has everyone seen that one on TV at some point?

Yeah, it's been playing quite a lot. And Joe Wilkinson, it's like a rom-com. It's pretty good. It's funny. It's heartwarming for the season. And who doesn't like a bit of Wallace and Gromit at Christmas?

But there's another series of ads that are out this Christmas from Tesco, which you might have seen, that sort of have quite a different message.

And it's one that I think is quite brave for Tesco to do. It's received some very mixed reviews, with some folks really not liking the ads at all.

[4 : 53] I think the message behind them is there is something of Christmas to be found in all of the real, perfectly imperfect moments.

And that's what makes it Christmas. Have a look. See what you think. Ah, it's that time of year again. Here's the turkey. A time for family.

What's happened? I had an opinion. That's what happened. It's a time for sticking with traditions. What? What did you have to get? Bag of nuts. Well, we can't stay long, but we just wanted to bring...

You ought to see something. Sure. And popping next door for... Stuff like that. It's quite festive. And writing Christmas cards for people you barely know.

Why are you telling people my personal business? It's Christmas. What are you doing? He's touching me. For getting one nice family photo. You do a circle.

[5 : 50] It could be anything. It's a biscuit. And spending quality time together. It does not make this a biscuit. I do dimples. Mum loves me more than you. What did you just say?

Are you sharp? Are you the favourite? No, you're not. Nobody would like it. Look, Christmas isn't perfect. But that's what makes it Christmas. Yeah, interesting. It's maybe not the Christmas we want, but I think there is a ring of truth, yeah?

Something that we maybe have experienced or recognised in our own families. And just to be clear, I don't think that these ads capture the spirit of what Christmas should be, but rather the reality of the messiness and the hiccups that make our Christmas with our families and our friends real.

And I think they're on to something. The writer and theologian, Nick Page, points out that too often Christianity, and specifically Christmas, gets turned into a performance.

Like this Matalan advert that's running this year that says, It's showtime where everything has to be just so. And interestingly, he says it can become an OTT birthday party that even Jesus himself would probably leave.

[7 : 14] And here's the thing. Whoever said that Christmas was supposed to be perfect? Perfect. You've probably heard or seen the nativity story many times.

I'm sure you have. Shepherds, angels, and unhelpful innkeepers. The trouble is, when we hear something so much, we stop hearing it. And instead of paying more attention, we often pay less.

We can tune out the familiar, even when it comes to the story of Jesus' birth. And it becomes too easy then to make it into a cozy nativity scene and miss out on the disturbing, sometimes, detail of a story that so powerfully shook the world in the first place.

So with that in mind, let's watch and listen to the story again from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verses 1 to 20. In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria, and everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea to Bethlehem, town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

[8 : 43] He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born.

And she gave birth to her firstborn. A son.

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

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, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

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

[9 : 59] Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you.

You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

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.

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they 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.

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.

[11 : 25] Now, if you were planning the first perfect Christmas, I'm not sure you'd do it this way. It all starts with Mary, a young girl, obedient to God's call on her life and an unexpected pregnancy.

If you want to know more about that and Mary's story, and if you haven't already had a listen to it, then you can do that on Matt's talk from last Sunday, which is up on YouTube. It's well worth a listen.

And then there's an audit by the tax authorities requiring Mary and Joseph to travel well over 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

These are the possible routes that they could have taken on Google Maps, because they didn't have that. The chances are that at least some, if not all, of that journey was done on foot by a heavily pregnant Mary.

Donkeys were really there for carrying your supplies. We don't know because it's not in the text. And of course, she was only days away from giving birth. And the birth location?

[12 : 36] Most likely a cave. Probably similar to this one that's been excavated in Bethlehem. Maybe, we don't know, but maybe with livestock in there. And you can see carved onto the wall on the right is a row of feeding or watering troughs for animals.

And this feature is thought to be, to resemble the manger into which Jesus was placed. It's not quite like the Christmas cards, is it?

And then the first visitors. The unwashed night shift workers out in the fields with their sheep. The vagrant nobodies of this world at the time.

And then of course, let's not forget, King Herod and his decree with murderous intent. It's not a great start, is it?

And yet, it's precisely how God chose to break into our world. In all its chaos and in all its messiness.

[13 : 41] So let's just have a look at these shepherds in the story for a moment. In first century Palestine, they were the night shift security guards.

The gig economy workers, if you like. The people who couldn't testify in court because their testimony wasn't considered reliable. Religiously suspect.

They couldn't keep the Sabbath properly because, well, sheep don't take days off, do they? They were, at best, people probably on the edge of the inside and more likely people kind of firmly on the outside of decent society.

And God says, perfect. Let's start there. And here's what I love in this story. Heaven crashes into earth.

It tears open the veil on these nobodies because God isn't interested in the world of power and prestige. God's joy doesn't sort of trickle down from the powerful to the powerless.

[14 : 52] It erupts from below. From the margins, from the fields where nobody important is watching. And these shepherds, they weren't having a prayer meeting in that field.

No one asked for angels. But suddenly, glory everywhere. The Greek word is doxa.

And it means God's presence. And it signifies weight, substance, the kind of reality that makes everything else look like a shadow. And here's where it gets interesting.

The angels don't say, I bring you happiness. Or I bring you good cheer. Or even, I bring you a reasonable sense of life satisfaction given your current circumstances.

No. The angels say, I bring you good news of great joy. And the Greek words here are charamigali.

[15 : 59] Literally, it translates as mega joy. Excessive joy. Unreasonable joy. The kind of joy that makes absolutely no sense given that these are shepherds who are still going to be poor in the morning.

Still going to be marginalised. Still going to stink of sheep. And this joy isn't the absence of suffering. It's the presence of meaning. Because light has come into this world.

A saviour has been born. Emmanuel. God is with us. It's not about our circumstances. Difficult as they might be.

It's about our story. And how this vulnerable child born in a nowhere cave. God showed up as a human being. God showed up as a human being.

Walked among us. Came into our world to mend the broken hearted. To invite us to live a different way. Because he loves us.

[17 : 11] Because he loves us. And that's good news. That's Christmas. That's the scandal of this. That's the invitation. Sometimes angels sing to people who weren't even looking for God.

Sometimes joy ambushes us. In the middle of our ordinary lives. And the miracle is. God doesn't wait for us to get it right.

God doesn't hold out for perfect circumstances. God shows up in the middle of our mess. And says this. This is where I want to be born.

So. This Christmas. When your relatives are arguing. When the roasties are soggy. Let's hope they're not.

When the presents disappoint. When you're too tired to feel holy. When the magic just doesn't come. Remember this.

[18 : 17] Christmas isn't about making things perfect. It's about an unexpected birth. In unpromising circumstances. And it doesn't pretend the imperfection isn't there.

It just insists that this isn't the whole story. And that's the whole beautiful, broken, glorious point. Christmas isn't about getting it right.

It's about showing up. And so this Christmas. Whatever your circumstances. May you be gloriously interrupted by mega joy.

May heaven crash your night shift. May you discover that you were never too insignificant. Never too messed up. Or too ordinary. Or too ordinary.

For glory to find you. Right where you are. And let your Christmas be real. Let it be enough. Let God enter through the cracks.

[19 : 22] Let love show up in the chaos. And hope be born in the mess. Bluetooth. And let that be the miracle. Amen. Amen.

Amen.