

Joy in Life

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[0 : 00] Let's bow our heads and pray as we stand. Father, as we bow before you now, we pray that you would shine your light into our hearts.

Fill us with a sense of your goodness towards us. Help us to see the Lord Jesus Christ and to take joy in him. And we ask this in his name. Amen.

Well, it seems as though a Christmas cheer and goodwill towards all is much more difficult to come by at the end of 2016 than most years.

At least that's what it's generally agreed. One of my favourite Vancouver writers calls 2016 a rotten, misbegotten year.

And he lists pipeline politics, fentanyl overdose deaths, police shootings, terror attacks, Western military build-up and a US election.

[1 : 04] And he says goodwill towards all is looking very shaky, particularly for 65 million displaced people. The Economist this year, for the first time in 31 years, won't make any predictions about 2017.

They say it's just too unstable and insecure. And I know it's been a very difficult year for some of you as well. And it does give rise at this time of the year to a kind of attempt to manufacture wonder. There's an English prof at a university here in Vancouver who suggests that what we do is we intermingle the idea of Jesus with spine-tingling ghost stories.

And somehow through that we'll discover the goodness of human spirit in the air. Quote, that's the miracle of Christmas, she is reported to say.

Well, what you find when you come to the readings tonight is that you don't have to manufacture anything. That there's a great deal to steal away our joy.

[2 : 07] But if we listen to the first witnesses, there is enough simplicity and wonder. There is enough glory and goodness, I think, that all our hearts could contain together.

And what I'd like to do for the next few minutes is just focus on those words that Victoria just read for us at the bottom of page 4, 1 John 1, verses 1 to 7, if you'd like to follow along.

This is written by one of Jesus' disciples, the same one who wrote the gospel. And now he's an old man, but he's never lost the childlike wonder and amazement at what God did through Jesus Christ. And even the way he writes shows his wonder. He uses the simplest possible words. They're all one or two syllable words through the passage. But he expresses the most sublime truths through them.

And I think this passage explains Christmas, certainly. And what it does is it explains the what of Christmas and the why of Christmas. And I just want to think about those two things for a minute or two.

[3 : 18] The what. What is it that makes Christmas so special? And the answer very simply from this little reading is that God wants to be known. Christmas is the annual reminder that you're not alone in the universe.

That God has come from outside the world which he made and which he loves. And he's entered into our world as a fragile human baby. And John wants us to get the direction of Christianity clear. That we didn't take the initiative and somehow reach up and pull God down. And that's the significance of the word in verse 2, manifest. If you just look at verse 2, the life was made manifest. Manifest means something which is invisible and unseen is made visible and plain and clear in its detail.

It usually applies to people who are hidden and then show themselves. And John brings together the timeless eternal truths of divinity with his five normal ordinary senses.

[4 : 43] He says what is eternal and what is divine entered into history and was made manifest to us. And you can almost feel his surprise. In the Greek there's an emphasis on us.

It's like can you believe it? It was manifested to us. Because Christmas you see has always had a kind of a historical lumpiness to it.

It's this historicalness to it that I think so many people find it hard to swallow. And it's deeply challenging to the way we think about the world and even offensive. I mean it would be much more congenial if Christianity stood in line with all the other religions.

And represented another human search for God or for nirvana or for enlightenment. I mean it would be much better if we could say Jesus was just a great moral teacher and he laid out a way for us. But I'm not going to lay that on you. Or if we could somehow strip the stories of Jesus of their historical truth. And make them into kind of just parables or like a kind of a Christian form of eat, pray, love.

[5 : 52] Except it would be eat, pray, love, get crucified and then rise again. Wouldn't it? If we could just make Jesus safer and more therapeutic as a way of dealing with our anxieties and our fears.

We'd feel much better about it. Well listen to what John says again in verse 1. That which was from the beginning. And in the original, not just there at the beginning.

He wasn't just starting at the beginning. But he was there before the beginning. He says that which was from the beginning. Which we have heard. Which we have seen with our eyes.

Which we have looked upon. Which we have touched with our hands. Concerning the word of life. It's the simplest possible way that John can use to speak of the reality of the physical fleshly life of Jesus.

These words are as though John is swearing an affidavit. He's saying, I didn't just see him with my eyes. I studied him and I actually, I touched him. I touched the word of life.

[6 : 59] He's using everyday common words. Except he's speaking about the Son of God. And he stretches our mind back before eternity. And he says that which was from before the beginning.

And then he stretches our mind toward the end of eternity. And he talks about the eternal life that's with the Father. And he says, this is what Christmas means.

God wants to be known. That the eternal Son of God has come to be seen and to be heard and to be touched. We couldn't reach out to him. But he has been made manifest to us in his kindness and his love.

God was made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. And I think part of what amazes John so much is that the revelation which is meant for so many was made to so few.

He says, we, we lucky few, we heard, we saw, we testify, we proclaim to the life that we touched. The way that God has manifested himself means now that he is publicly available to every single person.

[8 : 05] He's not revealed himself in a way that closes the door to anyone. There's no category of human who is excluded from this. And this, it has to be this way because the life that God is giving to us in Jesus Christ is a gift.

It's not an intellectual achievement. It's not a philosophy to master with lots and lots and lots and lots of study and brains. It's not just a modest contribution to the tapestry of religious voices.

This is real flesh and real life, the real God, experienced, proclaimed and received. When I was in my 20s, I read a series of books by a fantasy author called Stephen Donaldson.

A lot of my friends were reading them at the time. And Donaldson visited Sydney when the last book was published. And so I went along to hear him lecture. And one of the things that puzzled me about the Donaldson books and their fantasy, so they're all about the power of magic and good and evil, there was a creator figure in these books.

And he was useless. He never did anything. So I asked him the question, why doesn't the creator do a bit more in the book? And he said to me, the creator is no more important to the book than I am.

[9 : 22] He said, the creator shouldn't even enter the story just as I shouldn't enter the story. I've thought about it a lot since then. And I think Christianity is the exact reverse of that.

That the God who came into the world in Jesus Christ has written himself into the story. The God who made the world and made the universe doesn't stand at a distance.

He wants to be known. And he enters our world so that he might be known in the person of Jesus Christ. And it just means we're not left to guess. We're not left to speculate whether God wants to

be known or not.

He can be known. You don't have to wait around waiting for him to show up somewhere. He was manifest. We proclaim it so that you may know. That's the what.

Well, what about the why? Why does God want to be known? And I think the answer to that comes to us mostly in verse 3. If you just look down at it.

[10:24] He says that which we've seen and heard we proclaim also to you. So that you too may have fellowship with us. And indeed, our fellowship is with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ.

And we're writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the why of Christmas. As one commentator says it. God has gone to infinite lengths so that you can know him personally. In other words, God doesn't just want people to bow or to believe in him. He invites us into the friendship of an intimate relationship. Now, this word fellowship is a bit of an old-fashioned word. And, you know, we associate it with Lord of the Rings and blokey things. Or with some sort of academic grant. We don't use it much today. But in John's day, it was a very strong word.

It was used for marriage. It was used for holding something, holding together in common. It was also used for business partnerships where two people shared in something else. And they were bonded because of that.

[11:32] And the fact that God would send his Son so as to establish fellowship with us, I think is nothing short than astonishing.

In his mercy, God has not only manifested his Son, but he invites us to enter into friendship, communion, fellowship, partnership with him.

That's why Jesus came. There is no more important partnership than you could imagine. And if God is real, and if we're made for fellowship with him, it means we will always be discontent until we take our fellowship from him.

It doesn't matter how terrific other fellowships are, and they are. He's made us for himself. And our hearts are constantly restless until we find our rest for him. We love those stories, don't we?

When someone great does something for a small person. When Johnny Depp was in Australia filming the follow-up to Pirates of the Caribbean, he would put on his Captain Jack Sparrow costume, and he'd go and visit sick kids in hospital just on his own time.

[12:43] That was a lovely thing to do, don't you think? Tom Cruise, who, as I said at the earlier service, I've never referred to in a sermon ever before. This is a true story.

In 1996, he saw a woman hit by a car, and the car sped off. So he got out his phone, he called the ambulance, he got out and waited with the woman, and he followed the ambulance to the hospital. And when he discovered that she was uninsured, he paid the \$7,000 bill himself.

Or if you're a rugby fan, when the All Blacks team won the World Cup, after they had been given their gold medals and they were running around, they were doing a victory lap, there was a young boy that jumped over the fence to run towards his hero, Sonny Bill Williams, only to be heavily tackled by one of the security guards.

And if you know anything about rugby, Sonny Bill Williams is the one man in the world who needs no protecting. He's a very big guy. William stopped his victory lap, and he picked the kid up, and he gave him his gold medal.

That was a wonderful moment. These are great stories. We love these stories. But none of them come close to what God has done for us. None of them come close to establishing an eternal fellowship, a bond which gives life.

[14:05] None of them reveal the glory of God. Even if a great person were to give their life for someone, to rescue them from some sort of catastrophe, it doesn't come close to what God has done.

In the end, Sonny Bill Williams, the rugby union gave him another gold medal. It's fellowship with the Father and the Son.

And I think this has vast implications. And I know it's late on a Saturday night. At least I think it's Saturday. Let me just point out three implications to do with suffering, to do with human dignity, and to do with gratuity.

Firstly, suffering. I think there's a wonderful encouragement in this whole idea that God wishes to establish fellowship with us, particularly for those who are having genuine difficulties.

Jesus Christ brings to us the assurance that God is our Father. Apart from Jesus Christ, you can have no assurance that God is your Father.

[15 : 10] And it's as we come to know Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord and grow in that, we begin to enjoy the benefits of that fellowship with the Father. And when we suffer, we rely on our fellowships, we rely on our partnerships and our friendships, don't we?

We learn who is trustworthy in those circumstances. So for the Christian, suffering doesn't separate us from God, but it can be a way, a most difficult way of God deepening our trust in him.

What about human dignity? Well, if this is true, Christmas demonstrates how highly God values us. So we hear a lot of talk about human dignity today.

But if you have a secular worldview, if you believe that we are merely a vast assembly of nerve cells, then joys and sorrows and memory and ambition, they're just chemistry.

And there is no real basis for human dignity. But if that which was from the beginning entered our world to give us life, even dying for us, it means that God gives to us a massive dignity.

[16 : 26] The writer I quoted at the beginning, the Vancouver writer, he speaks about life as cyclical, but it's not.

It's a straight line. We go from here to there. Time goes from the beginning to the end. Christ has come from outside our world, the one who was with the father at the beginning.

And he's come to give us a life, which is not 80 years to 100 years. He's come to give us a fellowship with the father kind of life. And thirdly and finally, what about gratuity?

What we celebrate tonight, what we celebrate at Christmas, is the grace of God in Jesus Christ. If Jesus didn't come to get, he came to give what we could not get.

It is the sheer gratuity of what Christ has done that creates an ongoing overflow of joy.

[17 : 31] If God eternally loved Jesus Christ, the son, and if Jesus eternally loved the father and they were in fellowship together, it means they did not need fellowship with anyone else.

And since eternal life was enjoyed between the two of them in fellowship, they did not need us. And yet God created the world. And it makes what Christ did entirely unique, entirely gratuitous.

You see, a lot of people struggle with this part of the Christian message. We feel that we ought to try, we need to try a little bit hard to make ourselves worthy before we're accepted of his love, right?

I mean, sheer grace, I think a lot of people feel, sheer grace is going to produce a worthless and a decadent religion. You know, if you handed out university degrees completely free, without exams or requirements or fees, to anyone who just asked for them, surely those degrees would be useless.

So some people feel, if Christianity is all about what God has done for us, if it's all completely free, you're never going to be able to get Christians to behave well. But the opposite is true.

[18 : 49] Christ has come from heaven to give us life. He relinquishes what's rightfully his, not only in the manger, but on the cross. And the life he gives us is not just adding a spiritual dimension to our already very busy lives.

He's giving us a new thing, which is fellowship with God the Father. He's not just taking our lives onto a higher plane. He's giving us a new life, a different life.

It's a life that begins in fellowship and continues in fellowship beyond death with God our Heavenly Father. And that's why the shepherds left the sheep. And that's why the angels sing glory to God in the highest.

Because Christ has come to make the eternal God and Father known. He's come to make him graspable. And the challenge for us tonight is to grasp hold of that.

Amen.