

Christmas Eve 10pm

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Congratulations to all of you for making it here tonight. That was quite a journey. I don't know if everyone who set out to make it to this service made it to this service, but congratulations to you for being amongst those who did.

This little reading in the book of Titus that Craig read to us a moment ago, which I find on 9.98, and I don't know whether there's enough light around you to look it up. But this is a reading that's set to be read in churches all around the world on this night, Christmas Eve.

And the book of Titus is written by the Apostle Paul to new Christian believers on the Mediterranean island of Crete.

They'd never seen Jesus, but they'd heard the good news and turned to follow him. And they now gathered in little churches around the island to live out the new life in Jesus on Crete.

That was a tall order. That was a tough thing to do in Crete. Crete was famously a very rough culture. It's a pirate culture, violent, greedy, and proud of it.

[1 : 15] In fact, in chapter 1, the Apostle quotes a Cretan poet who wrote about his own people in these terms, and I quote, Cretans are always liars, nasty animals, lazy gluttons.

That's a big rap, isn't it? And he wasn't being critical. He was just naming the facts. So it was a culture in which truth and self-control were not highly valued.

And that's why this little, just four verses we, I want to meditate on with you for a moment, comes at the Christmas story from a very different angle.

It looks at the birth and death of Jesus Christ and how the birth and death of Jesus bring moral and spiritual transformation into our lives now, even to those on the island of Crete.

At the centre of the verses is the most astonishing moral transformation of the lives of ordinary Cretans, and I quote again, to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age.

[2 : 30] And it's very interesting to see how the Apostle does this. He doesn't tell them to make great effort. He doesn't give them a whole bunch of rules to follow. He says to them that your transformation comes directly as a result of relating to the one who came at Christmas and died on the cross.

Through that, what God has done is given each of you a new moral compass from Jesus himself. And I think that's highly relevant for us tonight.

I mean, don't you think that most of the polarisation and divisions in our culture today are along the lines of ethics and morals? You know, from global warming to equality rights to medical termination to sexualities.

Jonathan Haidt, who is a social psychologist at New York University and an atheist, he says, our moral reasoning is a skill we have evolved to justify our actions and to defend the teams we belong to, which is a slightly cynical view of morality.

Still, if you go beyond all the posturing and outrage, there is little agreement today in the West on what is right and what is wrong and whether we can even say there is such a thing as right and wrong.

[3 : 54] And in the last week, the swarming death by eight teens of the man in Toronto and the shooting death of five in the apartments in Toronto has led to much hand-wringing.

And the media I've been reading is calling for new teaching on ethics again. And the question this passage puts before us is this.

Where does real change come from? Where does real inner change come from? How does it come as we try harder? You know, do we need better rules, better policies, better leaders, better police services, better education?

Well, I mean, all of these things can be helpful, but at best those things can restrain us, but they can't change us.

And we're very glad tonight to sing to us, the sun is given, peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sin are reconciled. In the middle of a very dark season, as Jordan has pointed out, it's a year of war and it's a year of instability and it's still a year of disease.

[5 : 06] The question is, what practical difference does the coming of Jesus at Christmas make? And it's interesting that this is such a hope-filled passage for everyone who is feeling tempted to discouragement, who feels the darkness around them and within them.

The passage just shines with the grace and glory of Jesus Christ. It's like a source and fountain of hope. And the passage draws a straight line from the grace of God in highest heaven right down into our hearts through Christmas and through the cross.

And it makes two fundamental points. The first is the source of change and the second is how it works. The source of change and how it works on a daily basis.

So I'm just going to make two points for us to think about. Firstly, the source of real change. This is the way the Apostle describes the first Christmas in Bethlehem.

In verse 11, you can hear the angel echo. For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people. When he says it has appeared, that means grace did not start at Bethlehem but was foretold in ages past by the prophets and comes from eternity past in the heart of God.

[6 : 30] But in Bethlehem, the grace of God burst forth, glowing, radiating mercy and love. Because on that night, the Son of God left his throne to be born a vulnerable baby for us.

God's grace was literally made flesh for us, visible, touchable. The grace of God has appeared. And that means we don't have to grope after God guessing, but he's come to us bringing salvation for all people, irrespective of background, irrespective of behaviour.

It doesn't mean everyone receives salvation, but what it means is this, that no one is too broken for grace to meet and to mend.

And no one is too hard for grace to bring life. No one is too cold for grace to not heat. And what we celebrate tonight is the shining manifestation of the grace of God, the grace of God.

This is a favourite word in the Bible. It is the key that unlocks Christianity, grace. And put most simply, God's grace is his personal way of loving us.

[7 : 47] It is a love that has no motive outside itself. It just simply delights in giving and bringing blessing and good to those who don't deserve it.

And the grace of God is always free, it's always a gift, it's never a reward, and it's always rich and lavish and overflowing and unstinting.

It's never restrained, it's never reserved. It's his personal, spontaneous, unconditional goodness. And I think this changes our view of God.

I mean, we tend to see a God, we tend when we think about God to think that he's a bit disappointed with us, really. You know, how can they keep doing all those things after all I've given them?

And we imagine that God's love has a limit, an expiry date. But that's not the God of the Bible. And it's not true of the Lord Jesus Christ who came from heaven to be born for us.

[8 : 48] And it's interesting elsewhere in the New Testament, it says that the love of Christ is broader, higher, longer, deeper than any of us could possibly imagine.

And here is the Son of God. He is the only human who ever chose to be born. And he knew he would be rejected, and he knew he would not be recognised. And yet he chooses not just to identify with us in our darkness and sin.

He comes to deal with our darkness and sin. So the last verse in the passage speaks about the cross. It says he gave himself. Let me read. Our great God and saviour Jesus Christ, a very interesting reference to his deity, gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself, a people for his own possession, zealous for good works.

So he doesn't just empty himself into the form of a servant. He humbles himself to death on the cross. He doesn't just leave heaven for us. He endures hell for us.

He doesn't just simply die. He gives himself for us. And this is very personal. He himself for us, for us, to buy for himself, for his own precious possession.

[10 : 15] It's a conscious choice. He goes to the cross with his people in mind. And though it's supremely and infinitely costly for him, he does it because he wants to make us his own.

Now, there are many parents in our midst who have had kids who've had difficult times over the last years, and physically and emotionally and spiritually, and it's always close to the surface.

And some of you have said that you would be willing to give your life for your child because they're so precious to you. And I think in a larger way, it shows that we are of such value to Jesus Christ that he did give his life for us.

He doesn't wait for us to clean up his act. He takes the initiative. And this is where we begin to see how true change comes. God doesn't say to us, be good because it's good to be good.

He doesn't say, be good because society will work better. He doesn't say, be good or else I'll get you. He doesn't say, be good or else I'll bless you. No, it arises from the wonder of undeserved love and grace and giving.

[11:39] God, the Son of God, set his love on us. He didn't hold back. He doesn't meet us halfway. He gave himself from heaven to give his life over to death while we were busy seeking our own glory.

And that's why we sing the hymns. That's why we sing, O come, let us adore him. And this is the source of real transformation and change.

It's the person of Jesus Christ and our relation with him by love. So let me ask the second question, how does it work in practice on a daily basis?

The grace and giving of Christ then, the apostle says, works itself out in the ongoing daily transformation in our lives now.

Just notice the change of timing here. The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people. Now, training us today, ongoingly, to live lives that are self-controlled, upright and godly.

[12:47] In the original, training is an ongoing present reality, which is so encouraging. God doesn't leave us. The grace of God doesn't stop when Jesus went back to heaven.

But for all who put their trust in him, he, Jesus himself, comes into our lives to take up permanent residence in our lives, bringing his life and his love and his grace and his spirit and daily trains us and changes us.

And the word training is not the gymnastic, it's not an exercise word, it's a parenting word. It's used for parents when they sit up at night with their children or when they direct them or when they pick them up when they fall.

So the grace of God that appeared at Bethlehem and in the self-giving of the cross enters our lives now and raises us as the children of God with ongoing change.

And I can't think of any other moral thinking that comes anything close to this. This is not Greek ethics, it's not situational ethics, it's not ethics from the eastern world, it's not western ethics.

[14:03] If anything, it's the ethics of the kingdom of heaven. But it's not a list of rules outside us, nor is it the idea that I have to be true to my authentic self.

It comes from my relationship with Christ Jesus daily. How does it work? How does it work practically? Well, take lying. Lying, which was such a desirable feature of life on Crete and in some places today.

In traditional moral training, how do you teach honesty? We say, do not lie or you'll get caught. Or we say, do not lie because society won't work very well.

Or you say, do not lie because God will punish you. But those things can only restrain the heart. They cannot change. They can't change my inner character. They're temporary and they're superficial, but they don't go to the roots of my dishonesty.

The only way that I can change in this area is when my heart feels absolutely loved, so loved that it is unnecessary for me to lie and unnatural for me to lie.

[15:16] It's only the experience of the grace of God through Jesus Christ that changes the heart rather than just restraining the heart. Take being upright.

This is a relational word about how we treat others. Again, traditional methods would say, don't take revenge or you'll get caught. Or, you know, treat others well or society won't work well.

But it's only in the way God has treated us that we can learn how to treat others better than ourselves. It's only when we've experienced how God has truly valued us in Jesus coming and his cross that we can value others.

And you can apply this to any area. It's the grace of God in Jesus Christ that has the power. If you're someone who struggles with superiority and pride, only the grace of God can humble you.

Or if you're someone who struggles with guilt and self-loathing, it's only the grace of God can lift you up. It's only receiving his grace each day if you've been embittered, that can sweeten you.

[16 : 25] If you've been in grief, that can meet you. If you are anxious, that can calm you. If you've grown cynical, it can melt you. And all it takes is calling on him day by day for the dear Christ to enter in with his forgiveness and grace and to be born in us.

It's never going to come from looking inside ourselves. It's not going to come from trying harder and failing. But by actively taking the radical, costly grace of God into our hearts, knowing that he accepts me utterly despite my sin and there's nothing I can do to make myself more or less secure in his love.

That's why I think the apostle finishes by mentioning the second appearing of Jesus in verse 13. He says, That glory which the angels are looking at now, the great glory and majesty of Jesus in heaven, but hidden from our eyes.

One day he will appear, one day he will come, and when he comes, every eye will see him and every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord to the glory of God.

And that grace that appeared at the first Christmas now trains us toward this blessed hope because our hope is fixed on the person of Jesus Christ.

[18 : 00] And there's nothing that we can do that can strengthen or weaken his grace to us or his love for us. And here is our blessed hope, that the grace of God and the love of God appeared in Jesus Christ at Bethlehem and in the giving of him at the cross and one day when he comes again.

And in the meantime, we pray that he would reveal his grace to us and in us day by day, even now. Amen.