

Carol Service: Heart of the Christian Tradition 1989

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Date: 17 December 1989

Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] and forever. We are a people who are very much aware of tradition, and yet in the pluralistic society in which we live, our traditions seem to belong to a smaller and smaller group of people, and so traditions can easily be dismissed. There's a wonderful response to Christmas, Christmas, the music, the choir, the church decorations, all the hampers that were sent out today, and the general level of enthusiasm for the activities of the next week make it a very exciting time of year. And I guess, having spent all my life in the Northern Hemisphere, I think it entirely appropriate that this is the beginning of the week in which the shortest day and the darkest night falls. And in the midst of that darkness, we celebrate light.

And to show you how this tradition comes together, and how locked into that tradition is a presentation to you of what it is that it's at the heart of the Christian vision, the Christian gospel, the light which signs in darkness so that nobody can put it out.

When I come to a service like this, I am mindful that many of your faces are very familiar to me, and some are very unfamiliar. And I'm very much aware of a person who might stand and not sing the hymn or the carol because that person is not sure whether or not they are a Christian, or whether they want to be seen expressing something which might suggest that they are Christians.

It must be very hard, supposing you were engaged to a Christian girl, and you yourself were not really sure of the Christian faith. It must be very hard if you are a reluctant husband or a reluctant wife, accompanying your spouse to this service, and observing the traditions which have a powerful influence, all by themselves. But at the heart of it you feel bound to resist the impact of these traditions, so that you maintain your integrity as a person.

And I wonder if somebody in this congregation comes from a totally different faith than the Christian faith. And I would love to know what goes on in your mind and your heart.

[3 : 06] Because what we try and do in this service is to present to you the whole drama of God's intervention in human history. And as you listen to the scriptures being read, and as you listen to the choir singing, and as you partake in the carols that are sung, so this panorama is paraded before you so that you might see it.

And all I want to do tonight, really, is to help you watch how that panorama unfolds. And you would probably find it easier, and I would, if you had this in your hand.

And let me just show you, as the service unfolds, what it is that is being said. Beginning, if you want, with the hymn, Once in Royal David City, which was written by an archbishop's wife.

And the archbishop said, When history passes on, and I am gone, I will be remembered not as an archbishop, but simply as the husband of the woman who wrote once in Royal David City.

And that's true, because I don't think you know who he is. When the first lesson is read, and God is seeking Adam, and saying, Where are you?

[4 : 36] And the consequences of man's broken relationship to God are examined in the scripture. The place where everything went wrong.

And God inquires of Adam, Who told you you were naked? And then that wonderful thing the choir sang, and it added to it some verses, which I wish I'd known they were adding to it, but only because it fills out the wonderful story that is told there of where it all began, and how at Christmas, God is beginning to deal with the essential problem of our humanity, man's disobedience.

In verse 2, God seeks lost man for to restore, then to redeem our souls from death and hellish thrall. And we, in verse 3, we are asked to respond by renouncing all wickedness and living in peace and perfect love.

And as it goes on at the top of the next page, encountering the written word through which we come to enjoy our living Lord.

[5 : 59] And then all the structure of tradition breaks down. And instead of just sustaining tradition, we encounter our living Lord.

And I suppose our hope is that all of us will, in this service, encounter our living Lord. And in verse 4, the response of love and thanks to all that God has done is let's feed the poor and hungry souls. And lesson 2 tells you about Abraham and how Abraham believed God. And God promised, I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the sky.

And Abraham was promised that all the nations of the earth would be blessed. And that that blessing has come through the children of Abraham to all the nations of the earth.

And then the choir sings How Brightly Beams the Morning Star. And in verse 1 talks about the brightness of God that breaks our night and fills the darkened souls with light who long for truth.

[7 : 26] We're pining. Thy word, Jesus, inly feeds us, rightly leads us, life bestowing. A whole understanding of what the sacrament of the Holy Communion is.

That the word of Jesus inly feeds us, rightly leads us, life bestows upon us. And gives us reason for praise.

And the wonderful lines at the close of verse 2. Let us never lose thee, for we choose thee, thirst to know thee, all we are and have, we owe thee.

The living Lord. And in verse 3, you see that Christmas is inextricably bound up with Easter. The one who came as the Christ child of Bethlehem is also the one who conquered death and burst the grave.

The lamb who once was slain is the friend whom none shall trust in vain. And this will flood with light, earth's darkest place.

[8 : 46] Well, then the lesson comes from Isaiah chapter 9. People who sat in darkness have seen a great light.

Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders. And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

And with those words ringing in our ears, the choir stands and sings. Zion hears the watchman's voices. And if you look down at the chorale at the bottom of the page, which the choir sang a cappella, we turn the whole of our world at Christmas into an anticipation of heaven.

We enter heaven's bright portals to join the song of saints immortal with angels round the throne of light. No mortal joy can ne'er with heaven's true bliss compare.

And that's why poverty and weakness and illness and lonesomeness and all the afflictions which we count to be such deep afflictions at this Christmas season in a sense provide a better receptor for the wonder of the joy of Christmas which is an anticipation of heaven because in those conditions we know better our need for heaven.

[10 : 38] And we who are careless about eternal things have no particular anticipation for the need of heaven for indeed we're well satisfied with what we have at the moment and so much of Christmas is lost to us and Christmas is an anticipation of heaven and our very poverty makes the contrast more striking.

And then with lesson four you read the wonderful story of the shoot out of the stem of Jesse the O Come O Come Emmanuel is the hymn the wonderful sort of picture that a king will be born from a lowly shepherd family there is a king who in the power and riches and variances of all his kingdom is in anticipation of a heavenly one to whom wisdom and understanding and counsel and might and knowledge will all be given.

And to the keen environmentalists among you such a vision of ecology as would stagger your mind where the cow and the bear graze together and the leopard lies down with the kid.

You ecologists have a long way to go before you can pass that wonderful state which is anticipated in those verses. And then the choir before the choir sings the Lord's mission to bring righteousness to the poor is exalted and so the poor rejoice and blessed are the poor because they anticipate the kingdom that is promised to them.

And then the choir sings a spotless rose with powerful poetic imagery. Do you see on the coldest day of the year in the darkest night of the year the rose blooms?

[12 : 58] A powerful picture indeed, isn't it? To a world that is cold and indifferent and shrouded in darkness the Christ comes.

Well then we go on and read the next passage of scripture in lesson five which will follow this after we have sung that great Christmas hymn Hark the Herald Angels Sing which I'm told has 17 verses in the original most of which we will omit but which is a wonderful wonderful hymn simply because it translates all the traditions of Christmas into what it is they mean.

so watch with care as we go through the words of that hymn and then read the story of Mary and how she was greatly troubled and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be the son of the most high the one who would inherit the throne of his father David the one who would establish the reign over the house of Jacob the one of whom his kingdom shall know no end a powerful powerful picture for a young pregnant teenager in Nazareth a long time ago and then we sing the linden tree which I'm told is a lime tree and which is covered with beautiful blossoms and the beautiful blossoms are powerfully attractive for their sweetness to all the honey bees and they gather and this says but don't compare with the blossom which is the child of the Virgin Mary and in verse five you get that wonderful picture of how the tidings filled the hosts with glee they passed from one to other and that is that heaven rejoices with us as heaven rejoiced on the night that Christ was born and that there is great excitement in heaven over the plan of God's redemption and at Christmas we share that joy that transcendent reality which overcomes all the misery of our earthly circumstances and then in lesson six it is announced to us that is born this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the Lord king of kings and lord of lords and we sing away in a manger supposed to have been written perhaps by

Martin Luther except for the third verse which I think was written on this continent and which is the lovely prayer which every child should know be near me Lord Jesus I ask thee to stay close by me forever and love me I pray bless all the dear children in thy tender care and fit us for heaven to live with thee there the loveliness of that personal relationship to Jesus Christ in the heart and mind of a child then in lesson seven the announcement to the shepherds and the song of the shepherds and the great joy of heaven that bursts as the angel chorus announce the birth of Christ of the Christ child and the choir sings ding dong merrily on high and and you see this is again a celebration of a joy that does not arise from our circumstances miserable though we may consider them to be but this is a joy which arises from the very fact of God's breaking into our world and in verse three you see the monastic services of primes and matins and even song and all of them given to the praise of God and the rejoicing which finds its beginnings in heaven then in the eighth lesson the wise men come to Jesus to bring their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh and at the top of the last page you have the traditions of Christmas the star the wise men ah the gold all these traditions that have gathered around Christmas and in some ways have encrusted

[18 : 22] Christmas so that the traditions are very satisfying in themselves but something must break through all those traditions because traditions are only temporary things that do us service and traditions lose all their meaning within the Christian community if they knew not bring us face to face with the word who was made flesh and dwelt among us and that's what is read in the last lesson of the evening service and then the choir sings about Sir Christmas and I don't know where he fits at all but certainly he will be stimulating to think about who my Lord Sir Christmas is and whose ancestor he is well but there is one great thing about that piece which the choir sings which may be a great comfort to you and I'm surprised that Ed

Norman allowed it to be printed because the fourth last line says therefore sing we at a braid now as far as I can tell that's what donkeys do they bray without any music without any sense of timing they just open their mouths and bray and we are entitled by this line to do that no matter what our musical ability may be and to give expression to the joy we feel on music although it may be and as our service closes we sing O come all ye faithful and my heart's desire for all of us is that as we observe these Christmas traditions that we come in touch with our through the written word that we come in touch with our living

Lord that we know that Jesus Christ is at the center of our worship and he who was is and will be Jesus Christ the same yesterday today and forever and that we through this observance may know him more deeply and open our hearts and our lives to him more fully amen and with unto good conversation and coming through and he will wear forward and read the
Thank you.