

# Christmas Eve sermon

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Date: 24 December 2005

Preacher: Canon David Short

- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     Let's bow our heads for prayer. Our Heavenly Father, you are light and love, and we pray now that you would speak to us and that you would open our hearts so that we may receive what is beyond imagination and that we may have joy and fellowship with you.
- And we ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Please sit down. And if you take your bulletin and turn back to the Bible reading that Bev was supposed to read, 1 John chapter 1.
- Actually, it was very clever of Bev to read the Gospel reading, partly to see if you were awake, and partly because of how stunningly similar the beginning of the Gospel and this letter is.
- John wrote both, of course. I want to look with you at the first four verses mainly of this passage of 1 John.
- And I think you'll agree that as Bev read it for us, it says to us that our problem at Christmas time is not to draw ourselves away from every anxious distraction, but the problem is the sheer unfathomable enormity of the fact that the Eternal Son of God entered our world so that we might be able to enter His.
- [ 1 : 4 3 ]     The problem is not so much that our hearts are so full of other things, but that our hearts are just not large enough to begin to embrace the gift of Christ. This morning in the National Post, the newspaper did a very good job of reminding us of something of what happened on Boxing Day last year.
- A terrible change, a terrible catastrophe in the ocean depths, in the Indian Ocean, the Earth's largest earthquake for 40 years, unleashing a series of devastating waves, 15 metres high, racing towards 11 countries, carrying everything before it.
- We're very familiar with how the walls of water smashed into countries from Indonesia to India, from Sri Lanka to Thailand, swallowing villages and buildings and trains and families and children.
- And there are people in this congregation who lost family members in their tragedy. And the wave tsunami was called many things, but most accurately and most commonly, the wave of death.
- As you remember, 230,000 people lost their lives, 2 million have been left homeless, countless stories of tragedy and bravery, and yet the catastrophe elicited an unprecedented response of generosity from the world.
- [ 3 : 1 5 ]     Something like \$6 billion have been pledged towards relief. And no sooner had the waves died down than questions began to be raised about God's place in this from every different faith.
- The Muslim imams in Banda Aceh blamed the tsunami on lame Muslims who were not meeting their obligation to pray five times a day.
- And Sheikh Fazwan al-Fazawi stated that the tsunami was sent by God to punish South Asia because of the sex trade. And in Israel, the Shefadik chief rabbi, Shlomo Amar, said that the waves were an expression of God's wrath, punishing the world for wrongdoing.

And not to be outdone, a Christian leader publicly thanked God for killing thousands of Swedes because Christianity is increasingly difficult to be practised in Sweden.

I think questions many have asked is, how could God allow a tragedy of this magnitude? How could God call himself the sovereign Lord of all the earth and a God of love and allow 2,000, 230,000 precious people to be killed?

[ 4 : 37 ] And while the Bible does say a great deal about suffering, it never gives to us a simple, neat, prepackaged, tight, philosophically respectable answer to all our questions.

In fact, God does not respond to our suffering by giving us any theory whatsoever. What he does is he gives us himself. He doesn't give us a dissertation.

He gives us the life of his son, which is the reason why we have gathered here tonight. And the whole of the New Testament is the revelation of a cataclysmic event that has happened in our world, which has consequences for every man and every woman and every boy and every girl.

It is the incarnation of the eternal Son of God. It is Jesus Christ become flesh for us. And as we look at these words in the first four verses of this letter to John, the overwhelming reality that the incarnation brings for us is not death, but life.

Three times John speaks about Jesus as life. Just look at the end of verse 1. He says, All this concerning the word of life, the life was made manifest and we saw it and testified to it and proclaimed to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.

[ 6 : 06 ] You see, John is struggling with language to try and describe this one gift of Jesus Christ and he simply calls him life. And the reason is because Christianity is Jesus Christ.

It's not a system of explanations to give us a mythology so that we might feel better. It's not a moral system so that we might be safer.

But it's Jesus Christ who is our life. And John is speaking about the man and it seems to me that the day Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead has made such a deep impression on John.

You remember that Jesus brought his disciples with him to the town of Bethany and Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. And before Jesus gets to the tomb, he says to Martha and to Mary, the two sisters of Lazarus, I am the resurrection and the life.

Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. And then they march up to the tomb of Lazarus and Jesus calls Lazarus by name from the dead and Lazarus comes out.

[ 7 : 27 ] It's very impressive. Jesus calls himself the bread of life. He calls himself the water of life. He says he is the resurrection and the life.

He says I am the way, the truth and the life. And after he had risen from the dead in the last book of the Bible, he says these words, fear not, he says, I am the first and the last and the living one.

Behold, I died and I am alive forevermore and I have the keys of death and hell. That is why John says that when that life appeared to us, it was a different kind of life.

It was eternal life. Now you know that there are always brilliant and sophisticated experts who say they don't want eternal life because that will be very boring.

which probably says more about their lives than it does about anything else. Whenever the New Testament, whenever Jesus speaks about eternal life, he does not just mean life that goes on and on and on and on and on.

[ 8 : 31 ] He's speaking about a different quality of life. He is speaking about the life which God has in himself that he shared with the Son and that Jesus came to bring for us.

It is the life that belongs to God. It is the life of heaven, the life of God. It's different. And to have this life is the reason Christ came.

And John tells us in these first four verses that God has brought this life to us in two movements. One movement down, one movement up. It's like this, there's a program that runs on your computer that connects to the internet where you can type in your address and you can look at your house from a satellite and then you can look at your house from the front door and then you can look at your house from the satellite again.

I'm told. I haven't seen it. So what is the first movement? It is from eternity into time. From eternity into time.

Look at verse one, please. That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands concerning the word of life.

[ 9 : 47 ] Very interesting. John does not start with Bethlehem. He goes back behind the creation and he says, before this world was created, before time existed, before anything else existed, there was the Son of God.

There was the word of life. But the astounding thing about verse one is not that the word of life existed before this world existed, but that the word of life came into this world.

You see here, this is the miracle that you and I celebrate here tonight. It's not just that Jesus and the Father were eternally sharing fellowship together. The shattering truth that John says is that that eternal Son entered our world at a particular time.

We heard him, we looked on him, we gazed at him, we touched him. It is quite stunning. It's almost unbelievable.

And so John wants to draw us in with those four words of sense. We heard, we have seen, we have looked upon, we have touched with our hands.

[ 11 : 01 ] John says, we heard him speak, just as you are hearing my voice now. If you could get into a time machine and go back, you would have seen Jesus, you would have heard him. We saw him, we studied him and we touched him with our hands.

After he rose from the dead, Jesus said, touch me, you see I'm not a ghost. And John is saying, when we reached out our hands and we touched him, we were touching eternity. Christian faith is concerned with the historical, audible, visible, tangible, manifestation of the eternal in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And you know, throughout history, this has been a very difficult thought to comprehend. The idea that the eternal son of God should come on earth as a baby has been too much. And so various attempts have been made to break it down to our sides.

Let me give you two illustrations. In the early years of the church, there were a group called the Docetists who said, we find it impossible to believe that the eternal God could have any real involvement with this messy world of flesh and dust.

So they devised a theory that he only appeared to be really human. He was God, but he was in disguise. Jesus wasn't really human. On the other side, there was a group with the attractive name of Ebionites, and they had no trouble accepting that Jesus was a man, but they had difficulty saying that he was God.

[ 12 : 29 ] They said he is a man with great spiritual abilities and God has somehow given him a part of divinity. He's sort of a spiritual superhero. But the problem with the incarnation is you just can't break it down to our sides.

That is why John twice tells us in these verses that this revelation, this word of life, had to be made manifest to us, revealed from God to us. And it's the word for the shining of a light.

And I think John takes that because of verse 5, if you just look down at it. He says, this is the message we heard from him, meaning Jesus, and proclaim to you that God is light and in him is no darkness at all.

It's wonderful. See, the message that the apostles preached was not invented by them. It came from Jesus himself. Here is the teaching of Jesus. God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

He is good beyond our imagination. There is no shadow of evil with God. He is wise and true beyond our hopes.

[ 13 : 38 ] There is no shadow of ignorance with him. And because he is light, it is his nature to shine and to reveal himself because God's desire is to have fellowship with us.

And when God reveals himself to us, that revelation is good and pure and beautiful and life-giving. It's not just for those who are religious.

It's not just for those who have good and big faith. It's for everyone who will receive him. And when the light of Jesus Christ shines in our minds and in our hearts, we are unable to see ourselves as we really are, to grasp what is not graspable without his help.

You see, left to ourselves what we want as a hero made in our own image, a kind of a cipher for our own cravings. A superhero with sloppy morals who will affirm me but he certainly won't save me.

And we gather tonight to celebrate the most amazing movement, the movement of eternity into time in the person of Jesus Christ. As God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, time has been split by eternity.

[ 14 : 55 ] That is the first movement. And the second, very briefly, is the movement from time back to eternity. From eternity into time, from time into eternity.

Let's look back at verse 2, shall we? The life was made manifest and we saw it, we testify to it and we proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.

that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you so that you may have fellowship with us and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ and we are writing this that our joy, all our joy may be complete.

this is wonderful news. You see, Jesus did not come just to give us information. He doesn't enter our world of suffering to give us a few loose principles to live by.

He doesn't reveal the life of God and the light of God and the love of God and then zip back up to heaven and say, take it or leave it. The purpose of Jesus Christ entering our world is that we may have fellowship with God the Father and with the Son.

[ 16 : 12 ] That fellowship which is made available as this life is proclaimed to us. It's wonderful. You see, the gift of eternal life, it's not something cold and impersonal and separate from God.

It's fellowship with God himself. And this word fellowship is used of married partners. It's the closest sharing. It's the closest bond the two can have.

See, when God gives us eternal life, he gives us himself. We have a person in our household who is studying mathematics at university and I sometimes come to his desk and look at the formulas and it may as well be Russian to me.

And there are some people who think that receiving eternal life is like that but it's not. It's not hard. It's not just for the clever. It's not for those who are good.

It's not for those who are clever enough to work out the mysteries like a da Vinci kind of code. It's simply for those who will open themselves to him. I love reading Robert Fulford's articles.

[ 17 : 24 ] He is a what I would call an honest unbeliever. And he wrote in today's paper bemoaning the fact that he had lost his faith. He had dabbled in faith as a young man and has now lost it.

The article was entitled Christmas Confessions of an Unbeliever. And in it he says this, It's only on days when religious tradition fills the air such as Christmas and Hanukkah that we unbelievers glimpse for a moment the emptiness left behind when a sense of the divine has departed.

I want to say to Mr. Fulford that receiving the life that Christ has given is breathtakingly simple. But as John says here, the reason God sent him into the world was that we may have fellowship with him.

And that simplicity is the reason that verse 4 ends on this note of joy. It is the joy of eternal life. It is the joy of knowing God.

It is the joy of sins forgiven. It is the joy of fellowship with God. And you may have noticed that in the media sometimes there is a selectivity about the words of Jesus Christ.

[ 18 : 39 ] certain words of the Jesus and the angels are said and written and sung and others are left out. So you'll often hear it said peace on earth goodwill among men and what is left out is upon those with whom the Lord is pleased.

Or we'll hear it sung joy to the world but we won't hear the Lord is come. But our joy tonight must not be confused with happiness.

Happiness is always temporary and it's always short lived and it's always tied to our circumstance. Christ has not come to make us happy. He's come to give us something far deeper far more permanent and far more wonderful life with God forever.

He has come to bring us life. He has come to bring us ongoing personal conscious fellowship with the living God. That is the life that Jesus and the Father shared from the beginning.

It's the life the apostles saw and touched. It's the life that they proclaimed to us. It is the life which is fellowship with God which lasts forever.

[ 19 : 56 ] it is the life of joy which wells up for eternity. The sheer unfathomable enormity of the fact is this that the eternal Son of God entered our world so that we might enter His and we should rejoice together.

We're going to sing this hymn Joy to the World The Lord The Lord is come Let earth receive her King Let every heart prepare Him room and heaven and nature sing Let's stand shall we?

Amen. Amen. Amen.