

Nine Lessons & Carols 1990

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 0 0] ...to one another. The ultimate mystery of what that means is hard to fathom. I mean, no doubt you are conscious of yourself, and you may be conscious of the person on your left and on your right, but soon your knowledge fades and you don't know who they are or why they're here.

So we represent a mystery to one another. But these are the six things that I think we're sharing. First, we're sharing an aesthetic experience.

The church has been decorated, the candles have been lit, the organ has been tuned, the choir has been rehearsed, the bulletins have been printed, the manger scene is up there, and it's long before that.

There were architects who designed this Scandinavian-style church with its parabolic arches as something in which people would experience something which was lovely.

I'm not sure how much it counts for in the end, and whether it would make a difference if we were in a whitewashed barn. But it does provide a setting.

[1 : 2 1] So don't just come for that reason. The second reason is that we are taking part in a drama. And you can see that a stage is set.

It's highly stylized drama, but you will see that most of the actors wear funny uniform or costumes. And it's a kind of ancient ecclesiastical and liturgical drama that's gone on for centuries.

A drama which is meant, in a way, to portray the drama of our salvation, the whole awareness of how God has met us and how God intends to deal with us.

And it's a very precious thing in the world in which we live, because somehow we want very much to focus on God the Father who created us with all our senses and all our mind.

We want to focus on God the Son who came among us as at Christmas. And we want to share in the fellowship of God the Holy Spirit who indwells our hearts.

[2 : 3 6] And so we all are part of the drama that's taking place. The third thing is that we are listening to music.

And I don't have any idea what that means. But I imagine some of you do know better what it means. I go to symphony concerts and watch with envy because some people are absolutely ecstatic with what's going on.

And I'm mostly wondering what's going on. And feeling a bit alien because I don't have the sensitivity or the appreciation to really know what music is, what a strange and wonderful part of God's creation it is.

And how it is that we can join together in singing together and listening together and singing glorias and all sorts of wonderful things. But music is very important.

And I guess music allows us to express things that we could express in no other way. I spoke to someone just recently who told me that their faith was largely expressed in music.

[3 : 54] And I was impressed, but I didn't understand. And I still don't. But I remind you that that's something we're all here for. I'm only boasting my ignorance.

I'm not suggesting that any of you should be like me when I tell you that. The fourth thing that we're doing is we're telling a story. And it's the story that's taken from the scriptures.

And you're being taken through nine different pictures, as it were, from the scripture. And you're supposed to put all those pictures together.

And I wonder how you're doing it, putting them all together. The first wonderful picture of Adam and Eve naked, hiding from the presence of God. And we should be able to identify with that.

And God coming and saying, where are you? And we should be able to identify with that. It's a magnificent story of the place where man chose, consciously and deliberately, in full possession of all his faculties, to say no to God.

[5 : 06] And there it is, illustrated to us in a beautiful story. And then the next reader came along and gave us the next picture and told us how the God who had been rejected by Adam nevertheless came and made an eternal covenant with all the people of the world and said to them all that I will be your God and you will be my people.

He said, and I'm going to let all the people of the world know about this because Abraham and Sarah, your children are going to be as the stars in the heaven or as the sand by the seashore without number.

And it's going to be their duty to bring the good news of Christ's saving act to the whole of the world. And that was the promise that was made.

And that promise is picked up again and again through the story. And then you have the lovely picture of Isaiah's ecological heaven.

If you think the environmentalists have a great dream for the world, it doesn't touch the one Isaiah had. He said that the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid and the calf and the lion and the fatling together and a little child shall lead them and the cow and the bear shall feed their young.

[6 : 46] They shall lie down together and the lion shall eat straw like the ox and the sucking child shall play over the whole of the asp which is translated cobra in I think the New International Version.

The weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. And the adder is one of those serpents that when it bites you, you have half an hour of life left.

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain. And the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. That magnificent picture of a heavenly kingdom portrayed in earthly terms.

And then there's the picture of darkness. That's perhaps why we started our service in darkness tonight. And slowly the lights were put on.

And that to illustrate Isaiah's story that the people sat, that it sat in darkness, have seen a great light. And then the light is brought into focus.

[8 : 01] And the focus is a child that is to be born. And his name shall be called the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

And of his kingdom there shall be no end. And that's the light at midnight, at Christmas. It's interesting, isn't it, that as Christians we gather late in the darkest season of the year to celebrate light.

and then on Good Friday we celebrate light at midnight at Christmas and on Good Friday we celebrate darkness at noon.

Two interesting points. So that's the story. It goes on and then you get, pick up the new test of the story that Judy just read for us.

how a teenage girl in the West Bank city of Nazareth was confronted by an angel. What a...

[9 : 12] Well, I've been in Nazareth and walked along the streets and seen there, as I suppose in every other municipality, teenage girls in their Arab costumes and wondered, was it not such a girl as one of these?

It's an amazing thought. And then you move on to the story of that teenage girl with her betrothed husband Joseph traveling down south to Bethlehem in response to the emperor's demand that a census be taken.

And there in Bethlehem the child is born. And then another lesson comes along and tells us that when that happened, a host of angels filled the night sky and sang a chorus which was heard by the shepherds and which was, in a sense, the announcement of the incarnation that God in Christ had become man.

And it infuriates people that such things are utterly impossible. But except on such an occasion as this, you must remember that such things would be utterly inappropriate.

But it's precisely appropriate for such a moment as is described in Luke's Gospel. And then you have the story of, from Matthew's Gospel of Joseph and how an angel came to him as he tossed and turned on his bed at night wondering what to do with his espoused wife.

[10 : 58] And the angel told him and Joseph obeyed. And then the, the final tableau is put before you in a hymn with which the Gospel of John begins.

and it doesn't tell the events of Christ's birth. It tells the meaning of Christ's birth in the traditional Christmas Gospel.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. It goes on, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory as of the only begotten Son of God full of grace and truth.

And with that crashing, I mean that magnificent tableau that is presented to us, the meaning of the story of the shepherds, the angels, it's all brought together in that.

So that's the fourth thing that we're doing. The fifth thing that we're doing is we're rehearsing our theology, what it is we believe as Christians.

[12 : 13] And it's been part of the whole of Christian faith down through centuries now that people have learned their faith by singing songs about it.

I talked to Shem Karorero from Uganda who told me that in his country not many people are literate and they learn the Christian faith through the songs they sing.

And we are meant to learn the Christian faith through the songs we sing as well. And they are amazing ones.

Can I just get you to look at one of them for instance which is I think it's the one While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night.

Now I don't even know if it's here or whether I looked it up. Oh yeah, anyway, it's Angels from the Realms of Glory. It's on page three and this is the one I mean.

[13 : 23] But look at the fifth verse of that. If you want something that will utterly stagger the total capacity of your mind and heart when it says Though an infant now we view him he shall fill his father's throne gather all the nations to him every knee shall then bow down.

and you get that lovely awareness. Hark the Herald Angels Sing is a masterpiece of Christian theology.

Glory to the newborn king joyful all ye nations come and it's a picture of the whole consummation of history when every people of every nation come together to acknowledge the incarnate Son of God even Jesus Christ.

And so we're given opportunity to rehearse our theology. There's a lovely line in Adam lay e bounden which we sang at the beginning which I don't know how old it is but it's lovely that Adam lay bound for 4,000 winters.

Do you see that in verse 1? And that's because the ancient clerks looking at their Bible decided that the creation took place about the year 4,000 and man was enchained in sin through all those years until the second Adam came in Christ and broke the bondage of sin.

[15 : 17] And so you have this very powerful theological statement which is made through the singing of hymns. And the whole possession of the Christian faith is probably locked in your mind and heart in the words of Christmas carols.

You may think you know nothing about it but sit down with a pencil and write out the words sometime and you will find that the whole of the gospel the whole of God's purpose in history is known to you simply through the hymns and carols that you sing.

And so you probably know a great deal more than you suspect you know. The last thing that I want to tell you that we're doing here tonight is that we are meditating and the way we meditate is we listen to the scriptures and then we think about them and then the phone rings.

I mean that's what usually happens and our meditations are interrupted but tonight we listen to the scriptures and as we sit quietly our meditations are guided by the loveliness of the choir singing to us and we are allowed to meditate on the things that we've read after you read about the people that in darkness sat and the breaking forth of the Christ child you hear that lovely thing the choir sang for us break forth O beauteous heavenly light and usher in the morning shepherds shrink not with a fright our confidence and joy shall be the power of Satan breaking our peace eternal making what a powerful statement that is and that's the statement of the reality within which we live by reason of the

God whom we have come to put our faith and trust in even as he has made himself known to us in his son Jesus Christ and whom we are invited to receive by faith into our hearts so that our meditations will be closing with a question which presumably is to be the question of all our hearts in that lovely verse from the bleak midwinter on the last page which asks the question what can I give him poor as I am if I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb and if I were a wise man I would do my part yet what can I give him give my heart and so all that we are doing is to bring us to the place where if we have never done it before we will give our hearts to the person of the Lord Jesus who has the right to claim them we will ask him to enter into the lowly stable of our hearts to dwell with us that we may dwell with him to abide with us that we may abide in him and so by this sermon

[18 : 55] I have interrupted you I have interrupted your rehearsal of theology your meditation your viewing the tableaux from the scriptures I have interrupted the aesthetic experience of your being here I have broken into the drama of which you are a part and tonight it's music that speaks with eloquence and so I pray that you will continue to take part in this and that you will consider what your response should be to him whose glory is being declared in the story of Christmas amen be again Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.