

It's hard to believe in Christmas

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[0 : 00] Oh, good morning, everyone, and Merry Christmas. My name's Steve. I'm the senior pastor here, so let me add my welcome to the one that you've already received.

It's great to be in church with you this morning on this Christmas day, a day of anticipation, of excitement, of joy, and injury. Apparently about 80,000 people a year need some form of hospital treatment on Christmas day, mostly due to Christmas accidents of falls, cuts, burns, all throughout these festive periods.

Here's a few information for you that you might find helpful and things to avoid this year. Apparently, hospitals report on average four broken arms per year because of cracker pulling incidences. Three people die on average per year testing nine-volt batteries on their tongues. I mean, who does that?

Yes, exactly. Those people don't anymore. Around eight people per year crack their skulls while falling asleep as they're throwing up in the toilet at the same time.

[1 : 16] Eighteen people receive serious burns each year on average, trying on a brand new sweater, jumper, while they have a lit cigarette in their mouth.

Obviously, cheap material. The thing just flames up in no time at all. More than 30 people have died since 1996, watering their plastic Christmas tree with the fairy lights still on.

There's a whole heap of problems there with that one. Sorry, 58 people are injured each year by using a sharp knife rather than going to the shed and getting a screwdriver.

Approximately 10 people a year have to have surgically removed broken parts of plastic toys removed from the soles of their feet.

This one, I just can't work. 142 people in one year, in one year, one Christmas day alone, were injured because they tried on the new shirts without taking the pins out of them first.

[2 : 36] I mean, it just... Anyway, have a safe Christmas. You know, it's a day of joy and celebration and yet it ends up in emergency for so many people.

But it's not just physical injury. There is also a whole heap of relational injury. Do you know that one third of Australian families will almost come to blows by the end of the day?

One third of Australian families. It's a day where there's a veneer of perfection. A veneer of joy and happiness where you've got to get the food right, the presents right, and everything else right.

And yet what underlies that is a deep hardship in so many ways. Christmas is hard.

It's a time of joy, but it's also mixed with a day of sadness and hardship. And even the message of Christmas. See, what we don't often see in the Christmas narratives as they come out is the fact that it's surrounded by hardship of difficulty.

[3 : 48] We often are faced with a sanitized version of Christmas. I've heard, for instance, nowadays people are getting their narrative scenes and sprinkling them with cinnamon and nutmeg and things to make them smell nice.

I think I said a couple of weeks ago, if you want to go for authenticity, it's animal refuse that should be sprinkled in your nativity scene. Now over the Christmas season here at St. Paul's, over the last number of weeks, we've been asking the question, is Christmas believable, unbelievable?

We've seen over the last number of weeks that the story of Christmas isn't just a great story, a great myth that you kind of cling to at the end of a hard year.

It's in fact a true story that's historically reliable. We've seen the evidence for Jesus being a real person, that the New Testament accounts of his life weren't made up, they're historically accurate, and that the miracles that are described in not just Christmas, but in Easter and the gospel stories have not yet been disproved by science.

That is, the conclusion is it's reasonable to believe in the Christmas narrative as they are portrayed in the gospels. But still, so many, and even this morning, looking on articles in newspapers, so many people say it's just a great thing to hang on to.

[5 : 13] That's all it is. It's just a story. Don't need to have your life shaped by it in any way whatsoever. Christmas is hard to swallow.

It's really hard to swallow. But it was on the very first Christmas as well. We see it in Luke chapter 2. Let's get a glimpse here of what's happening.

When Jesus' parents brought the eight-day-old Jesus to the temple, which was Jewish custom, there was an old man there.

My name is Simeon. Simeon had been waiting for the long-promised Jewish Messiah and the Jewish ruler. And when he saw Jesus, he took him in his arms and he spoke what are now famous words.

The noctimitus is what they've become known as. These words are being used in Christian church services to dismiss the saints for centuries.

[6 : 21] It goes something like this. Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.

But that's not all that Simeon said. He also went on from that to say something quite troubling. This child is destined to cause the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.

And he says to Mary, and a sword will pierce your own soul too. Now, those words are relatively unknown. They've not been put to music.

They're not read out in Christmas services around the world. And it's probably because they're hard words. They're rather depressing words, even disturbing words.

And yet, they get to the very heart of the meaning of Christmas. The Christmas story and the words of Simeon tell us that Jesus Christ, the long-awaited one, came into this world to be rejected.

[7 : 43] Even in the really familiar part of the Christmas story at the beginning of Luke chapter 2, the bit where it says she wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them.

What we are meant to read there is not that Bethlehem was busy. What we're meant to read there is right before he is born, he is facing rejection.

Jesus is cast out. We have no room for him. He's being shut out. And we see that as he grows and matures that Jesus came to get people mad.

He came to reveal hearts and have them speak against him. Why? Well, it wasn't because he loved rejection.

There are people like that in this world who just love a great fight and love to be rejected. They just love it. It makes them feel important in some sort of way. But Jesus came not seeking rejection, but knowing that he in fact would face it.

[8 : 56] He embraced the rejection because it's at the very center of the reason that he came. And if we don't understand the rejection that he faced, why he faced it, and the implications for us, then we can never actually understand Christmas.

That is, Christmas can never, ever be good news for us. There are three main reasons Jesus faced rejection, and I want to go through this this morning real quickly.

For being too ordinary, for exposing human hearts, and for our acceptance. So first of all, he was rejected because he didn't meet humanity's expectations of a savior and a ruler.

That is, Jesus was not the right kind of person. He didn't look or act like a savior or a ruler. He was just too ordinary. When Jesus presented the temple, we are told in verse 24, that Mary and Joseph brought along a couple of doves and a pigeon for the sacrifice.

In other words, if you go way back hundreds of years, back into the Old Testament, you'll discover that that was specifically the sacrifice that was used if you were extremely poor.

[10 : 24] That's Mary and Joseph. That is, Jesus was born into poverty. He came from the wrong side of town.

He didn't have the credentials for leadership. In Mark chapter 6, we are told that his own hometown, his closest circle of friends, reject him.

They were offended by him. And the word there in Mark 6 is, they were scandalized by him. Why? One biblical scholar in his commentary on Mark 6, I think states it really well.

He writes this, their discernment could not penetrate the veil of ordinariness that surrounded him. What were the words in Mark 6 of his townsfolk?

Isn't this guy a carpenter? Isn't this the guy whose dad died young and raised by a single mum? [11:31] This guy's got no connections. He's on the margins of society. He's not leadership material. He wasn't the captain of the Nazareth, you know, soccer team.

He got no connections. We're even told in Isaiah 53 that he wasn't good looking. So let's just picture, you know, the traditional baby Jesus.

As I read Isaiah 53, he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him. Nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering and familiar with pain, like one from whom people hide their faces. He was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

No blue eyes, no blonde hair, no lovely curly locks. Jesus was not a celebrity. A celebrity has always been, throughout the history of celebrity culture, celebrity has always been someone who has it together on the outside, even if they are a wreck on the inside.

[12:50] On the outside, they're beautiful, and if they're not beautiful, then they're extremely talented. It matters not if their relationships are a wreck and they struggle with addictions.

In a celebrity culture like we are existing in right now, it's the externals that are validated. It's the superficial that we regard.

It's the outside, the appearance that matters. And Jesus comes along and destroys all of that. He says your status, your look, your beauty, your achievements, your position, your connections, your degrees, it's nothing.

He doesn't measure any of it. He's not impressed by any of it. What matters is your heart and your soul. And so if you're a Christian sitting in this building or connecting on stream right now, what Christmas means for you at the very least is that you reject all forms of snobbery.

You're not impressed by what people are impressed with on the outside, and you're not repelled by what people are repelled by on the outside. What you care about is character, humility, compassion, wisdom, and integrity.

[14:22] Jesus is rejected because he is too ordinary to be the saviour and the ruler of the world. The second reason he's rejected is because he reveals the ordinariness of our inner lives.

We think he's externally ordinary. He thinks we're internally ordinary. Have a look there at verse 35. This is what Simeon says, the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. Jesus Christ showed people who they really were and they didn't like it.

The book of Romans in the New Testament tells us that deep down, every single human being, every single human heart is in need for God and for a saviour.

We all know we are sinners, even if we don't use that terminology, and therefore, we need a saviour. But the way that we have dealt with that as people is that we all have this engine that's revving very high, deep down inside of our souls, deep down inside of our hearts.

[15:37] It's in overdrive all the time, and it's the engine of self-justification. And that engine desperately, desperately wants to think that we are okay.

And so we consistently suppress the truth about God. It does not want to know about God or what he requires.

It doesn't want to know that we need a God or that there is anything wrong with any of us. And anything that makes us hard to suppress that truth, anything that wants to tamper with that engine that's deep inside of our hearts, gets us mad.

You know, same as when someone points out a flaw in you, your instinct is defensiveness. That's the engine working in overdrive. And along comes Jesus Christ, living a perfect life.

And he gets us mad. If you read through the Gospels, you will find that he both mesmerizes and alienates. He attracts and he infuriates.

[16:52] He evokes rejection and hostility wherever he goes. In the Christmas narrative, King Herod hears that Jesus is born the king, and he is threatened.

He's a representation of our hearts. He is threatened, and he wants to even have the baby Jesus killed. When Jesus Christ comes to anybody and reveals himself as the true ruler of our lives, that gets us mad.

Much easier to have a Jesus constrained to a sanitized narrative who just loves everyone.

And people get upset in the end at any Christian who lives and loves like Jesus because it reminds them of their own hearts and their priorities and their actions.

You don't actually have to be perfect to be rejected. You just don't have to have the same value of those in society around you. Living a life like Jesus exposes corruption and immorality and gossip and greed in every culture because no one likes the depths of the immoral heart being revealed, nor those who reveal it.

[18 : 19] Christmas means there is often not room in the end for those who follow Jesus. But lastly, he's rejected for our acceptance.

You see, Jesus Christ came into this world knowing that he would violate the world's standards and its priorities. He would turn them all on their head and that he would intimidate people with his life and his message, but he came because of his substitutionary nature of his work.

And he is rejected for that very work. Let's go back to Isaiah 53 that was read out to us. Right after it says, like one with whom people hide their faces and he was despised and he held him in low esteem, we read this.

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering and yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was on him and by his wounds we are healed.

[19 : 29] We are like sheep, have gone astray, each of us to turn to our own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

What that's basically saying in a nutshell is that Jesus' rejection was ultimately for our acceptance. That is, he didn't get rejected as an example for us on how to be rejected and how to deal with rejection.

He came to be rejected specifically as our saviour. He was rejected for our transgressions, for our sin, for our rejection of God. Simeon says in verse 34 that Jesus is to be a sign that will be spoken against.

And because Jesus was spoken against, we can be spoken for. Because there's no room for him in the inn, we get to have a place with God forever with him.

Jesus knew that his acceptance would be our rejection by God. But his rejection would be for our acceptance and he chose rejection for us.

[21 : 02] Now Christmas is dangerous and Christmas is hard news. But Christmas is the greatest news and the greatest gift.

But by their very nature, some gifts are very hard to accept. So imagine this morning, a family gathering and you unwrap, someone hands you a present, you unwrap the present and it's a book titled How Not to Be an Arrogant So-and-So.

Pick specifically for you. It's very passive aggressive. I wouldn't recommend it. But it's going to hurt your sensibilities.

You unwrap a present like that, you know, or a year gym's membership or a, you know, how to, you know, lose weight in 10 days or something, you know, it's going to hit your sensibilities in some kind of way.

And yet it's most likely needed. The message of Christmas is so hard to swallow because it says something not just about Jesus but says something very significant about us.

[22 : 18] And yet it's a message that if you embrace it, it ultimately leads to healing and soothing. You know, in the same way that a surgeon brings healing to your body, you can't do that without first spilling your blood and cutting you open.

Or a psychologist to bring healing to your future and your present often has to deal up some really, dig up some really bad stuff from the past and deal with that.

They're both wounds that lead to healing and to health. The reason Jesus makes us so uncomfortable is because he challenges our worldview.

He challenges our perceptions of ourself. He forces us to expand our theory of life and its purpose and its goal. The magnificent, perfect, flawless God comes down into our ordinariness.

He immerses himself into the pain and the vulnerability and the suffering of the ordinary human life. It took God to take such drastic steps to save us and that is offensive to our sensibilities to think that we are that helpless in our sin that he has to go to that kind of lengths for us and yet we cannot know the blessing of forgiveness, of life, life forever if we have never felt the offence first.

[24 : 05] We should feel the offence of Christmas but we must not take offence at it. It is for our joy and for our acceptance. It is hard to believe in Christmas because to experience the joy and the contentment and the meaning and the satisfaction of Christmas and the hope of Christmas we must take the sword to the soul.

We must take the sword to the soul first but when we do there is healing and there is hope and there is joy. Make room in your heart for the saviour.

Now if you are someone who is not sure about how that all connects with the Christian faith I would encourage you and invite you this Christmas season New Year's resolutions are just around the corner so here is maybe an opportunity to do that right now.

There is a QR code there to log in and to explore take the next step of exploring what is the Christian faith all about or come back in February because we do a whole series of the Christian faith and how it is good how it is plausible and how it is deeply deeply satisfying.

This Christmas make room in your heart for the saviour Jesus Christ. Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas.