

Recognising Jesus

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening, everyone. Great to be in church with you tonight. My name's Steve. I've not met you before, which I can't tell if I have or not. It's all black out there. I'm the senior pastor here at St Paul's, and in this Christmas season, the last number of weeks for us, we've been really focusing on really the song that we've just sang right at the beginning about preparing him room.

That is a season of actually inviting Jesus into the centre of our life, and the reason for that is that despite the fact that Christianity and Christmas makes an astounding claim, it is in fact believable. And it's not just believable, but it is unbelievably good when you come to see what Christmas is declaring, because if you can get to the centre of Christmas and the meaning of Christmas, you actually get to the centre and the heart of the Christian faith.

That this is an infinite God who has made all things, who has made himself known to us, and yet fully aware that we're in 2025, and many in our world do not believe this.

And in fact, it's not a new thing. Back in 1961, the Russian Yuri Gagarin was the first human being to go into space.

[1 : 30] At the time he went into space, Nikita Khrushchev was the premier of Russia. And one of the things that Khrushchev said, which really kind of went global in the media, was that when Gagarin went up into space, he discovered that there was no God there.

He found no God. He had to look out the window of the spacecraft and he couldn't see God. And so in response to Khrushchev making that claim, the Oxford professor, C.S. Lewis, wrote an article titled The Seeing Eye.

And so what Lewis writes there in this article is that if there was a God, he said, if there was a God who created us, then that God would not be discovered by going up into space to look for them. You could not relate to God in the same way that a human being might relate to another human being, a human being on the first floor, and the way that they would relate to a human being on the second floor.

He said, because both of them are the exact same beings. Lewis wrote that for God to relate to humanity, the way that God relates to humanity is the same kind of way that, for instance, Shakespeare might relate to Hamlet.

[2 : 59] Shakespeare is the creator of Hamlet and the world of Hamlet. And so Hamlet has no way of knowing or acknowledging Shakespeare at all unless Shakespeare was to write himself into the play of Hamlet.

And so Lewis's point is that the only way that we could know if there is a God who exists was if that God was to write themselves into the story, the history of his world.

And therefore, not just write himself in, but write himself in as a character in that story so that other characters could interact with the God who's written himself into the story.

And so the claim of Christmas, which is really the central claim of Christianity, is that that is exactly what the God who has made all things has actually done.

God does not just write information about himself and send it to us, but that he has, in fact, written himself into the very drama of history.

[4 : 22] That is the extraordinary claim of Christianity. It's the story of Christmas. And it's a story that isn't just, you know, good for our heads to get our minds around in some way.

It's actually a true story that happened in history. And this still leaves us, even if you were to grapple with that and come to acknowledge it in some philosophical way, it still leaves us with the so what question.

That is, if that did happen, if Christmas is true in any way, what does it mean for us?

And in actual fact, to flip that around, if Christmas isn't true, we don't just lose the wonder of this time of year.

We, in fact, lose everything. Lose everything. We lose meaning. We lose life. We lose good and evil, even you and me.

[5 : 32] So what I want to do in the next little bit of our time together is look at the story of Christmas, the alternatives that are out there with that. And I know it's late at night and maybe your brain like mine is switching off.

So I'll try to be brief. And I don't assume that I'm going to be able to, you know, convince you in this moment. But just to give you a snapshot. So first of all, no news story.

In his global bestseller, *Sapiens, A Brief History of Humankind*, the Israeli historian Yuval Harari, what he attempts to do in his book there is to tell the story of humanity from its beginning.

And what Harari, as a person, rejects the claims of Christianity. He rejects the claims of Christmas. But he does recognise the substantial influences it has had on the history of humanity.

And what he does is he argues in his book that in fact, our deepest moral beliefs today are not self-evident truths that many in our world want to claim right now.

[6 : 47] They're not self-evident truths at all. He says they are, in actual fact, they are beliefs that are grounded in the Bible. This is how he puts it.

For instance, the idea of equality is inextricably intertwined with the idea of creation. If we do not believe in the Christian myths about God, creation, and souls, what does it mean that all people are equal?

Now, most people in our society nowadays have a sense that human rights are good, that things like racism are wrong, anti-Semitism is wrong, that men and women are equal, that things like murder is evil, and that the rich should oppress the poor.

the poor, but why? Why do we have a sense that those things are good and right? What Harari says is that in actual fact, if there is no God who has created all things, he says, there is in fact no moral facts at all.

They are just opinions, nothing more than just opinions. The British historian Tom Holland makes a very similar book in his book *Dominion*.

[8 : 15] He stopped himself believing in a God as a kid, but after years and years as a historian and as a researcher, he actually found himself being drawn back to the person of Jesus as he's portrayed in the New Testament.

It was mainly because he found that many of the values that he held deeply, he held them dearly, were intimately connected to the person of Jesus.

They weren't just inherent beliefs. Human rights, equality, equality of men, women, love for foreigners, care for the poor, vulnerable, the marginalized, are specifically Christian beliefs.

And history shows us that it was only as Christianity spread in the world that these beliefs became generally accepted and particularly became the foundation and framework for Western civilization. Because the ancient world in Jesus' time laughed at these ideas. and yet we exist in a culture, in a society nowadays, where the broad consensus is that you can actually keep the values, but you can get rid of the God who's behind those values.

[9 : 46] And Harari explains what happens when we do that. As far as we can tell from a purely scientific viewpoint, human life has absolutely no meaning.

that is based entirely on scientific terms, human life has no meaning. Humans are the outcome of blind evolutionary processes that operate with our goal or purpose.

Our actions are not part of some divine cosmic plan. Hence, any meaning that people ascribe to their lives is just a delusion.

Any honest atheist agrees with Harari at this point. Now, there are certainly people who think their lives have no meaning, but on the most part, none of us actually want Harari to be right at all.

That meaning in our lives is a delusion. The bad news story is though that if there is no God, then we are left with the reality that we live and we die and we decay and that is it.

[11 : 02] That's it. But Christmas, which is why it is full of joy and light and hope, Christmas is the alternative.

The Christmas story is in fact the good news story. So that's where we want to jump into that passage there. If you've got it in front of you in John chapter 1, you see, at the beginning of John's biography on the life of Jesus, we don't get, he doesn't start with the birth of Jesus, but he starts

with the birth of the universe.

And he mentions here a key figure who he calls the Word. I'll read the first few verses for us. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

He was with God in the beginning. Through him, that's talking about the Word, through him all things were made. Without him nothing was made that has been made.

In him was life and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

[12:14] And so what you do is if you read John's biography as it unfolds, we in fact discover that the key figure that he's referring to here known as the Word is in fact Jesus.

You see, what the Bible teaches is that the created God is one God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit who have always existed together for all eternity in perfect love relationship with one another.

What that says is what the Christian faith believes at the centre of all reality, of all ultimate reality is a God of perfect love relationship.

And what happens on the very first Christmas, it marks the moment when God the Son, the Word, the Creator of all became a human being with a very specific purpose.

John's biography tells the story of our lives being part of a loving cosmic plan of a loving God.

[13:28] I'll read it again, verse 9. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him.

He came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, children born not of natural descent nor of human decision or a husband's will but born of God.

And then we read right at the end, the Word became flesh and made his dwelling amongst us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only who came from the Father full of grace and truth.

And a couple of verses later it tells us the one full of grace and truth is none other than Jesus the Christ. So what that's saying there is that Jesus is the author of the story of history but he's also the lead character.

The God who made the universe who creates and defines history enters it, enters history in order to redeem it and rescue it.

[14:55] And instead of being celebrated, he's rejected. instead of being honoured, he is killed.

And the wonder of it though, in writing himself into the story, the wonder of it is his death was written into the script as the central part of it.

It wasn't an accident. So if it is true that there is a God who made us and loves us, then this is fantastic news.

Christmas is unbelievable news. There is in fact such a thing as meaning and purpose. There is in fact such a thing as good and evil.

And yet, if you sit and you ponder it and let it sink in a little bit, you also start to see that this Christmas news is also terrible news.

It is humbling news because it's saying that all of us, all of humanity, we need us, we need saving. We need rescuing.

[16:06] We need saving from a judgement that we rightly deserve for living our day-by-day life, trying to create purpose and meaning for ourselves and keeping God at arm's length.

Now, some of us are deeply aware of our failures and our sin, even if we might not use the word sin. If there is a God who sees everything and knows everything, then we know that this isn't good. Now, on one level, that's good and that's healthy. The Christmas story, the message of Christianity is in no way a self-help message where we are told that you're kind of mostly good enough and God just gives you that little bit extra help along the way.

You see, every time we see Jesus helping someone in the biographies, it's those who knew they weren't enough. They're the ones that Jesus welcomes.

Those who were considered too bad or too broken were the preferred company of Jesus, the Son of God. And that's us.

[17:29] You see, the reality is none of us gathered here right now would escape even a moment of embarrassment.

If every single one of our thoughts and our actions, every motor heart was projected on these screens and live streamed for everyone to see tomorrow, the reality is I'd be crushed if it was just today's tally was thrown up on the screen.

And yet this God sees it all, the all seeing eye. He sees it all. This is terrible, but it's not the end of the story.

You see, the Christmas story, we are told Jesus is presented with three gifts. We sang it just a moment ago. Three gifts by the astrologers who came from the east, the Magi.

And one of those gifts was myrrh. Now, any new mother in first century Palestine would have been thrown by this gift of myrrh. Why are you giving me myrrh?

[18:40] It's because myrrh was used to embalm the dead. Myrrh was a symbol of death. It's like, you know, instead of baubles hanging on your Christmas tree, you know, hanging little coffins on there instead.

Bizarre. And yet that's what Jesus came to do. He came to die. That's in fact what he needed to do to bring about reconciliation between God and humanity.

Jesus would die for the sins of humanity. About 33 years after his birth, he was crucified just outside of Jerusalem. But his death was not the end of the story because three days later, I'm getting into Easter here.

Come back for the full story. But three days later, the tomb was empty and Jesus appeared to his followers and over 500 people at different times and he was alive physically.

He faced death in order to defeat death. He paid for our sins so that we don't have to. He knows the deepest secrets of our hearts.

[19:55] He knows the failures and the shame that we carry but he loves us all the way to death and back and all we have to do is trust him.

That in reality is the answer to the so what question of Christmas. That is, the so what question is this good news story can be in fact your good news story.

So which story is yours? You see, the Christmas story is part of God's story of time and eternity and it really has four parts very briefly there.

Chapter one, the God who stands outside of creation, who always existed, creates all things by speaking into existence. It's the only storyline. That is, the Christian storyline is the only storyline of all storylines in the history of humanity that declares that a divine being created all things out of love.

That was the purpose of it. Chapter two, humanity rejects the authority and love of God. All people live life with no consideration for God and relationship with God and with each other and with our world is deeply fractured.

[21:13] All brokenness and evil and carnage in this world is connected to chapter two. Chapter three is God's plan to reverse all this brokenness and sin. That's what we're talking about here in the Easter and the Christmas story.

Jesus takes the punishment of God for our rebellion. It's the death that we should have died.

Everyone who puts their trust in him is gathered back into relationship with God and with each other.

Chapter four is not really the end of the story at all. It's the beginning of a chapter that has no end. It's a chapter where God, where Jesus reigns with his people in a world of perfection and peace that is remade.

That's the good news story of Christmas. Written in history and billions of people over the past 2,000 years have found hope and light and meaning and joy in that story.

There is another story however that's risen in the last couple of hundred years only. It's taken up residence particularly in the soul of Western civilization mainly in a big way in the last 60 years.

[22:27] The technical term for it is philosophical naturalism. It's really secular materialism. It's a three-chapter story. In the first chapter it states that there's no supernatural or spiritual or personal power that rules the physical universe.

Everything that can be seen and measured is a result of an explosion that appeared out of nothing billions of years ago. Chapter two of the story is that against all scientific evidence and even scientific reason and even scientific logic in any way life came from no life miraculously and eventually humanity evolved from the prehistoric suit to be the dominant species of the earth and therefore despite every sense that we might feel there is no such thing as right and wrong.

No matter how much I create purpose there is no such thing as purpose and meaning. Everything in this world is an accident so life has no purpose and it's best therefore just to make the most of life, live it the best you can because chapter three will come and chapter three is just simply the end. The sun will burn up, humanity will cease to exist, there's no form of afterlife or survival of the conscious and the story of materialism is that what you have right now is as good as it's going to get.

The Christmas story says that we have a loving creator who has triumphed over evil at great cost to himself to love each one of us dearly and we look forward to a day when everything wrong in this world will be made right and we'll live with him in blissful joy for eternity.

[24 : 27] Whichever story you hold to, it starts with a premise where you need to put faith. which story is yours?

The Christmas story might be hard to believe as in fact so is the secular materialistic story but the Christmas story is unbelievably good news.

But to get to the point of being good news, we must start by seeing humanity is that we are the villain in God's story and Jesus is the hero.

So the man is the one who is the one who is the one who is the who!