

What does Christmas mean to God? - Evening Carol Service 2024

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[0 : 00] Every morning when we come to church, Sandy and I pick up Josh, who's on PA, and also then we go on to Andy Sawyer's house, and Andy Sawyer and Sue quite recently had a video bell installed on the front door, and whenever I see a video bell, I just want to do something in the hope that they're watching on their phone.

So every time I go up, like this morning, I get pressed the bell, ding dong, and I go right up to the bell sort of video bit, and I start singing, we wish you a merry Christmas, and I'm not sure if Andy's ever seen it before, but this time when he opened the door, he started to be the Scrooge and said, I don't make merry myself at Christmas, and I can't afford to make people like you, idle people like you merry, which I thought was the lovely start to our Sunday.

Christmas. It's going to take more presents to convince me than that, Andy. Christmas. What does it mean to you? But tonight, I want to look at, more importantly, what Christmas means to God.

I don't know. In fact, can I ask you to put your hand up if you came to walk through Bethlehem last week? Great to see you. Oh, that's so good. We, some incredible people, for those who don't know, created the town of Bethlehem in this church.

I actually think it's really fun for folks who came to the church for the first time to Bethlehem, not knowing this was outside of the sky, which went right across, if you get my meaning.

[1 : 43] And for the first three days after it was built, we had six groups from six primary schools come in, and they had the opportunity to go around the whole of Bethlehem learning about the true story of Christmas.

And we started this a number of years ago. By the way, this year, over 400 people came through that door. Most of them, I believe, don't go to church, or certainly don't come to this church.

And they were so blown away by what God was doing with some broken people made new at Whipy Christian Fellowship. It was a wonderful time. I've always been taken by the fact that when we started this, when we were based at Estdale School on the other side of town, we had a bigger hall, and we started to do it.

In the early days, there was one particular lady who came up to me most years and said, you know, this is what Christmas is all about. They'd been to lots of Christmas fairs where you could buy tinsel, very important, wrapping paper, super important, but I'm glad that Sandy remembers it because I wouldn't.

Sell the tape, cards, and fun things like that for Christmas. And I understand there's a place for that, but Walkthrough Bethlehem was nothing like that. And folks who'd been to these Christmas fairs to buy all the stuff they needed actually said, no, this is what Christmas is all about.

[3 : 11] And another family came to me one year and said, you know, our Christmas doesn't begin until we come to Walkthrough Bethlehem. We were enjoying it.

Absolutely delighted people were coming. And on one time or two times up at Estelle School, we had the lady with her donkeys off the beach came. I was a centurion with others.

The first time we did it, we didn't put thermals on. We had big fire pits outside. It was freezing. But beyond all the cold and uncomfortable aspect of that event, we were so blessed that people came because they wanted to know more about the story of Christmas.

And in effect, what it meant or means to God. Walkthrough Bethlehem was a precious time. Next time we do it, if you haven't been before, please come.

If you have, bring others and enjoy it. Luke chapter 2. One verse in the Bible I just want to read to you now. Luke chapter 2 verse 10 says this.

[4 : 20] The angel said to them, the shepherds, just like Michelle was speaking of there. They said to the shepherds the understatement of the Bible. Do not be afraid.

Too late. They'd already got to that point. Actually, that was one angel said that. There was a whole host of angels about to appear.

But this angel said, I bring you good news. And it will bring great joy for all the people.

I want to ask you today. Have you heard this good news? And do you know the joy that the Christmas story, and it's not a story like a fable.

It's a fact. The Bible is true. I've learned that myself. And so have many other people. We may not always understand every aspect of the Bible.

[5 : 19] But that doesn't mean to say it's wrong. Probably just means we're a bit thick and God is God. And we're not. I wonder if you know about the joy of Christmas.

Because the joy of Christmas is not just for that week or two of Christmas. It's for eternity to anybody who puts their trust in God.

Do you know that joy? Actually, when I think back all of my life to all the different Christmases I've been to, they weren't always such a joyful day on Christmas Day.

As a younger guy, I used to really struggle to be with my family. Because they didn't understand me. I didn't understand me. And we sort of bumped heads more often than not.

I wonder if there's many families today who, like me, would, in those days, I would love to have had a miraculous or a miracle Christmas where the family got along and we didn't argue.

[6 : 21] That doesn't always happen, does it? Quite often, Christmas can be an incredibly stressful time. I used to be a policeman.

And one day, many years ago, I got a call that a lady was about to commit suicide on Christmas Day. What an incredibly sad thing. And some of you will know the story.

I shot down there, tried to. I knocked on the door, got no response. So I kicked the door down. By knocking the door off its hinges, I destroyed a crockery that was all over the kitchen. I didn't mean to do that.

I was just a bit sort of quick. I was going to a Christmas party, so that probably had something to do with it. And then I searched the house and found her laying under a duvet on the bed upstairs. And she was so terrified she didn't commit suicide because she thought I was a burglar.

I did the job, but not quite the way that most people would want to know. She didn't know joy on that day. I wasn't a Christian, so I didn't know I have any joy to tell her about.

[7 : 20] But later in life, I knew that I could tell people about the joy and the security and the absolute love of God that I could experience at Christmas once I became a Christian.

We love watching a lot of the Christmas movies. I know they're just daft, but they're fun. And a wonderful quote from Home Alone where Kevin's mum says to Kevin, Christmas, it's the season of perpetual hope.

It's not a bad statement, is it? In truth, most parents call it Christmas, the season of perpetual help. Trying to make it all work. But it is perpetual hope.

Because God brings hope. God brought hope through the angels to the shepherds. And the shepherds went to see the baby. Then what did they do? They went away and told everybody about it.

Because if this joy and this love and this peace that God brings at this time of Christmas, this good news is truly good news, you can't keep it to yourself.

[8 : 25] And if you do keep it to yourself, you don't understand the depth of what that good news is. And many people, when it comes to Christmas, really, I mean, I've met some people, only see their families at Christmas.

Because they can't stand to be with them any other time. And there's broken families and it's so sad. In fact, somebody said Santa Claus had the right idea, just visit people once a year.

But many families are looking forward to Christmas. And I pray this year will be an extra special one for you and for them.

Next slide, please. Leading up to Christmas this year, I came across a wonderful quote I want to share with you. By an author called Max Lucado. In the Christian book world and so on, he's very well known.

And he wrote a book called What's So Amazing About Grace. If you've never read that, either buy it or ask us and we'll give you a copy. It is the most incredible explanation of the grace of God that came at Christmas.

[9 : 31] And you can know that on a daily basis today. But in these simple words of his quote, he sums up the passion of God's heart to redeem a broken world.

To redeem, which you sung in one of the hymns, in one of the carols just a moment ago. To redeem a broken world means to get back. To pay something in exchange for them to be brought home, as it were.

See, we are a broken world. We are a world of people who have sinned. I don't know about you, but many times in my life I've felt incredibly guilty, full of shame.

And I've come to God and asked him, in honesty, Lord, forgive me. I can't do this. I can't live like this and God has forgiven me. It's an amazing experience. And I would encourage you to consider that if you've never done so before.

Let me come back to this quote of Max Lucado. He said, the story of Christmas is the story of God's relentless love for you and me.

[10 : 39] This relentless love, that means he's unending, he's never going to give up on you. The relentless love of God for you. So, he says, let him love you.

And Christmas, he says, invites us to believe the wildest of promises. That God became one of us so that we could become one with him.

It's an incredible statement. A crazy statement to get your head around. That God says he wants a relationship with us. I think it's wonderful that God never, ever said, I want you to me to have a religious connection.

Or go through a series of kind of procedures over and over again doing the same thing. He says, no, I just want a relationship with you.

To those who believe. To those who put their trust in me. To those who repent of their sin. I give the right, he said, to become a child of God. And that's why Jesus said, when you pray, pray our Father.

[11 : 47] Because as you put your trust in the living God, Jesus, you become a child of God. And that shocked the Jewish people at that time.

They'd never come across the idea that they could look upon God from a child Abba Father. That's what it literally means. Perspective.

A relationship that is as close as that. And incidentally, if you've had a tough time with your father as a child, put that to one side. Because that's not the love of God. That's not the character of God.

It's not the God that relentlessly chases after you. It's incredible that we may know Jesus who became one of us in the form of a baby.

Lived on this earth. Did miraculous things. Showed the Father God to the world. Jesus said, if you've seen me, you've seen the Father. Isn't that incredible?

[12 : 46] That's Christmas love. That's God's. That's what Christmas means to God. That he could pour out his love on a world which he knew would mostly reject him and not think anything of him.

And the significant verse in our carol service. Isaiah chapter 7 verse 14. This was referred to this morning by Richard in our morning service. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel.

Can you imagine going to the synagogue as a Jew in those days and hearing Isaiah read out time and again. And you come to that verse. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel.

Emmanuel. Emmanuel means God with us.

God with us. It must blow our minds away if we get even a perception of that. Not even necessarily the whole thing.

[13 : 51] God with us. This is the wildest of promises that Max Lucado was referring to there. See when we become a Christian.

When we give our lives into God's hands. We ask him to forgive us of our past. Our shame. Our sin. I'll never forget the day I did that first. Stood in a church. A big Methodist church in Harrogate.

Surrounded by 300 people. I was so out of my depth in a church. I didn't know what I was doing there. Until I heard that he told me God loved me. You know the closer we get to God the more apparent is our sin and our guilt and our shame.

And I look back and realize that my life was really screwed up. It was a mess. But the God of Christmas.

And I mean that in the right sense. Reached down into my heart. Emmanuel whispered into my soul.

[14 : 54] Come to me. Because that's what he's asking you to do today. See Jesus gave up his place of honor in heaven. To come to earth as a baby.

At Christmas. To save us from our sins. Not just to give us a nativity scene. A nativity scene is quite right. But the depth of him coming.

Is so much more apparent. And you know Jesus didn't come to berate us for our sins. Because certainly in my case. And I would imagine in yours as well. We already know we're sinners.

In fact when I wasn't a Christian. I hated the phrase sinner. Because I didn't want anybody judging me. But then of course I realized it was God who would judge me.

And that made all the difference. And I had to admit. Yes I am a sinner. And I don't like it. And I don't want to be that way anymore. In fact I said to God. God if you're real. Come and do in my life.

[15 : 54] What you've done to these Christians I've met. Who by then have become my friends. And as I invited God to come and change my life. He expressed his love to me.

That he came as a baby. Christ came as a baby at Christmas. That he would die on Calvary's cross at Easter. As it were. So that I could be forgiven of my sin.

See God knew our sin had to be dealt with. It couldn't remain as it was. And Jesus on that cross paid a debt he didn't owe. Because we owed a debt we couldn't pay.

Only Christ could be the one who could come and take away our sin. J. John. J. John. A well known Christian speaker.

Made a wonderful simple yet incredibly profound comment. You see. Nobody likes us saying. We've done wrong. Do we? You know.

[16 : 54] If I do something wrong. I don't like somebody coming up and saying. Oh by the way Mike. I noticed that you did that wrong. I know I did it wrong. And I'm sorting it out with God. But.

J. John said. Jesus didn't come into the world to rub it in. To crush us when we already know that we're sinners. He didn't come to rub it in but to rub it out.

To erase our sin. And when God forgives us. It's as if we never sinned. That's the truth of the Bible.

And it's crazy. One of the wildest promises of God. When he took our place on the cross at Calvary. He paid the debt that we owed.

And he said. It is finished. Next slide please. So to finish.

[17 : 53] Wouldn't it be lovely. If we could rub out all the mess. We've made in our lives. Then we wouldn't have to. Be confronted with God.

We could do it ourselves. Couldn't we. You know when you were at school. And you wrote with a pencil. Or you were an artist. And you drew with a rubber. And you got your rubber.

Because you made a mistake. And you tried to rub it out. I was so enthusiastic. To rub things out. When I got it wrong. And didn't always get it right afterwards. But what I could see was. Even though I'd rubbed it out.

The spelling mistake was still there. Just under the rub. So I rubbed a bit more. And then I made it such a mess. I'd start all over again. I always used to say to my teacher.

It's not my fault. It's the pencil doesn't spell right. And I always had a rubber to hand. But I was like that about my sin as well.

[18 : 55] I was like that about my guilt and my shame. And I'd always try to suppress that guilt by saying. It's not my fault. It's society's fault.

It was that man's fault. He shouldn't have put his head so close to me. That I could hit him more. Whatever it would be. That he was a nasty person. So I had to do something about it. It was my fault.

Not their fault. Your sin can be erased. Rubbed out. Totally forgiven. Right here tonight. That's the wildest promise of Christmas.

The good news for Christmas is for you. But look on that picture. What do you see in the middle? A wonderful Christmas hat. And there's one at the back.

That's good to see. I love the hats. I love that. But what I would just say to you tonight is. Don't let the decorations of Christmas.

[19 : 52] Sort of. Obscure. The truth of what Christmas is about. Emmanuel.

God with you. And you know. If today you're facing difficult circumstances. God. With you. Will be with you.

Sandy and I have. And Shelley have a. And Veronica and Ken. We all have a ministry. In the motorcycle world. And we get to meet some incredible people. But just in the last few weeks.

We've had a number of people we know. Who have passed away. So incredibly sound. For the families. And I've. Held people. And hugged people. And wept with people.

When their family have died. And some people. Who weren't Christians. Have said to me. Where was God when this happened? And I understand that phrase. I understand that cry.

[20 : 51] But the reality is. Emmanuel. Is right beside you. And all you've got to do. Is turn to him. And cry out to him. Put your trust in him.

You know. When the Bible says. Put your trust. In God. It doesn't say. Have loads of faith. So that you will be able. To connect with this. God in the distance.

Not at all. It says. The merest. Speck of dust. A mustard. Seed of faith. Is all that's required. And the Bible says.

Put your hope. In the living God. He's not dead. He's not. He's not distant. He's. He's real. And he's the savior. Of all who believe.

Now to finish this completely. I would ask you this. I'll share this with you. When Mary and Joseph. Were looking for somewhere. To stay the night. In Bethlehem. They were told.

[21 : 48] There was no room. Now that. I was taught. They were told. There was no room. It wasn't just at one location. They would have gone to many. Bethlehem was only a small place.

In fact. We were saying. After Bethlehem. That because we had over 400 people come. There was actually more. Population. Of Bethlehem. In the day. That Jesus was born. The population of Bethlehem.

The historians will tell us. Is of roughly 300 people. It was only a small. Insignificant place. But oh. The significance of that place. So Mary and Joseph.

Were told. There was no room. No room. No room. And then ultimately. There was a place. And it wasn't. Because God hadn't provided a place.

This was the place. Because everybody thought. The Messiah would come. And live in a palace. But yes. Christ had given up. The jewels. And glory.

[22 : 45] The beauty of heaven. To come to earth. To be born. In a manger. One of those. Carols we sang. Spoke about him being in a cradle. Which isn't actually true.

It was the manger. It was a feeding trough. Surrounded by the smells. And the animals. Of that time. But it just occurred to me. To finish.

I wonder if any of the places. Mary and Joseph. Had knocked on the door of. And said. We really desperately need. Somewhere to stay. My wife's. About to give birth. Have you got somewhere.

We could stay. And they were all told no. There's a busy. Busy town today. Because everybody's come. I wonder if anybody. Regretted. Not saying.

You know what. We'll give you our bed. You know what. We'll put the stove on. We'll get the fire going. We'll keep you warm. We'll look after you. I think.

[23 : 38] That first Christmas. Had many. Many regrets. You've probably been asked this today. But I'm going to say it anyway. Would you let Jesus in?

I don't mean when. He was being born. But will you let him. Into your life today? Otherwise. You're going to regret it. And I mean that. With all the sincerity.

You will regret it. If you don't let him in. Today. So what does Christmas mean to God? It means his love. Relentlessly poured out.

For you. So please. Don't miss this opportunity. Would you bow your head? You don't have to bow your head. But I'm asking you if you would. Because I want to pray.

And I want to pray. I want to pray. I want to pray. I want to pray. That the truth of this. Will connect with your heart. And soul. Heavenly Father.

[24 : 35] Heavenly Father. You are our father. When we put our trust in you. And we as your children. Come to you tonight. And say thank you for this.

Account. Of Christmas. That your love for us. Is not to berate us. And crush us. And condemn us. But it is to love us. And to deal with our sin.

That we may have life. Which the Bible says. Is life in all its abundance. I pray father. For each person here. And those who will hear this.

When it's recorded. Maybe at a later date. Father. Father. Reveal. Yourself. To each of us. As we whisper your name. Jesus.

Come meet with us. Father. May nobody leave this place. If they feel you've spoken to them. Because when you speak to us. It's an emotional moment. And we aren't to be surprised at that.

[25 : 34] You are real. You are alive. And you are God. And I pray father God tonight. Somebody will simply come to you.

And say Lord. Forgive me of my past. Make me clean. Help me to start again. Putting my trust in you. Learning about you.

And walking with you. For we ask this in Jesus name. Amen.