

Luke 2 v1-7, Matthew 1 v18-25

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Date: 22 December 2020

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0:00] So my frustration with Christmas carol services and Christmas sermons is that there is a secret deal that takes place.

! And that is that I, as the speaker, don't say anything too offensive and you as the congregation respond in generous Christmas thanks.

I tell you to be more generous, to be more loving. I tell you that Christmas is about more than gifts. I tell you to remember the vulnerable and the homeless and those less fortunate than you are.

I make you feel a gentle guilt about it that you might give more. People sing carols hard to leave. Maybe you get a little bit emotional during a couple of them. And then you say to your friend, if they brought to you, you say, oh, I really enjoyed it. It made me feel Christmassy.

And so what I want to say is I think that is the exact opposite of what the Christmas story should do. And I think that secret deal that happens between preacher and congregation misses the real meaning of Christmas.

[1:04] Because the real meaning of Christmas is in many ways offensive. And that was brought home to me a few years ago by what came home from school. So from my children, go to make it to the school and they had their Christmas playing with them and their Christmas songs.

And there were three words in the carol and in the readings that were crossed out and they had been replaced by other words.

They were changed. The words that had been scribbled out and had a line through them were King Jesus, Saviour and Son of God.

And they'd been replaced by the man Jesus, baby and Mary's son. But of course, I went into the school and had a very embarrassed chat with the teacher. And they were very kind and very generous and very afraid.

And they changed the terms. But they said they were changing those terms because they didn't want to be offensive to others. One of the things we love about the local schools, isn't it, is that they are multi-ethnic. And you have so many people from different cultures and that is a wonderful thing.

[2:14] Head teacher did say to me, Mr. Levy, we really do want Jesus to be at the heart of Christmas. And so my question is this. Can you take the kingship of Jesus and that Jesus is the Saviour and that Jesus is the Son of God out of Christmas and still have Jesus at the center of it?

If you take Jesus as King and Jesus as Saviour and Jesus as the Son of God out of Christmas, what you're left with is the Victor of Divinity. And you're left with pure sentimentalism and myth. It's a lovely story, but it's just not true and you can't grow into it. And so I wanted to kind of go at councils and I've done this talk once in university, I don't think I've done it again. I'm really about the offensive Christmas.

Because I think you cannot just scribble out those words and have a more sanitized and politically correct version of who you want Jesus to be. Because what you think of Jesus doesn't actually change the reality of who he is, does it?

So the first word is, he is the King. We've heard it in the reading. The word Christ is a biblical word. It means God's anointed one.

[3:33] Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is God's King. So the first question you ask when you hear that somebody is a King, well, King of what? There's a King of Spain, a King of Denmark.

We will one day again, we will be a King of England. So who is the baby in the manger? Where is he King of? Well, the Bible teaches he is God's King.

And so that is, he is the one who has come to be King over God's world and God's people. And he will bring in God's reign. And you see that in his life, don't you?

Where the presence of a King is, there is authority. And so as you read through the Gospels in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, you see how Jesus reigns over creation.

And you see how he stands on a boat in the middle of a storm and he says, peace be still and even creation obeys him. And you see, he takes five loaves, a couple of fish, and he feeds five thousand people with them.

[4:41] You see, then he walks on water. He's the King of creation. But he's not only the King of creation, he's the King of people. He calls people to him, doesn't he?

And they leave their lives and they follow him. And the outcast, the stranger, the homeless, the immoral, they are, find themselves drawn to him.

We read about wise men who came from the East bringing gifts fit for a king. You read about it at the end of his life, that they mock him.

And they nail a sign to his cross which says King of the Jews. And they get a crown of thorns and they put a robe on him and they bow down. And they laugh at him and they call him King.

The Bible teaches that he rose again. And when he rises again, he gathers disciples around him, his followers, and he says, All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me because I am King.

[5:39] He's a King with authority. And you might think, well what on earth is that going to do with me? Well, Jesus' claim is that he is a King forever, for everyone.

And that means he has the right to rule. And what that means, if that is true, is that he is King and you are not. And he rules and you don't.

He has the right to say what is right and what is wrong. And he has the authority over you and you don't. So the little baby that we think is really cute, lying in the manger, actually has the right to rule my life.

But you know and I know that I have lived my life without even thinking about him. In fact, more than that, I have not even bothered to get to know him.

And when I have heard his law, I have laughed at it and I have thought it is primitive and it is backward. And I have rejected his rule. And I am not willing to accept him as King. In fact, I adamantly refuse to.

[6:46] So I rebel against his authority and I think that is a really small thing. I am not bothered by it. And so Christmas is all about a king that I refuse to recognize.

But there is one person who really gets it, isn't there, in the Christmas story, and that is Herod. Herod gets something right.

My brother has got a carol service that he preaches when he is really fed up on why Herod is the only man that understood Christmas. Herod is a vicious despot.

But Herod realizes this. He realizes that if the baby is king, he can't stay on the throne. And he hates it. And so he seeks to eliminate him.

Because Herod realizes if the baby in the manger is king, then he can't stay on the throne. That is the first word of the offense of Christmas. He is the king. The second one is the saviour.

[7:45] Mary is told, isn't he, you shall give him the name of Jesus for he will save his people from their sins. And we understand rescue. So, the child drowning in the water and the dad jumps into the water and drags the child out.

The people trapped in a burning building and the fire brigade break down the door and they rescue the people in there. In fact, the Royal National Lifeboat, Lifeboat organization, the RNLI, have got a Christmas campaign.

I don't know if you've seen it. They've got an envelope. And on the envelope it says, my son's ready to rescue others this Christmas. It's a great Christmas message. It's not a difficult concept to understand.

But Jesus will rescue his people from their sins. It's something that says that sin, it's the 1950s. The baby has come to rescue from our sins. So here's what the Bible says about sin.

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Because the first step to getting help is to admit that you need help. But let me say this to you, is when you recognise before God that everything is not okay and I can't sort it out, that is the most liberating thing you can do.

It's the greatest relief that I can take the mask off, that I can stop pretending. That God sees me and he knows everything about me and I don't have to hide.

And he knows my fears and he knows my anxieties. The God who sees and knows the worst about me has sent a rescuer and he is the king and he is the saviour of the sinners.

The last offensive word that we read in the passage is that he is God with us, Emmanuel. And so the message for Christmas is that the God who made the heavens and the earth, the God who has existed for all eternity, the God who never began and will never end has entered into this world.

[13:50] And so he's a God who stoops low. He's a God who comes down. He's a God who loves. And he's a God who cares. And so he knows what it is to stand at the grave and weep.

He sees hypocrisy, he hates it, but the poor in spirit, the humble, he can't keep himself away from. And he did that all because of love.

He came to make God known. The invisible God that you cannot see. You might have even said it. If there is a God, why doesn't he make himself known?

Where is he when I need him? And the Bible screams that you, God has come down. Jesus has come to make him known. He is stooped. So it's good news for the captive.

And it's good news for the shamed. It's good news for the doubter. And it's good news for those who've rebelled. It's good news for those who've walked away.

[14:53] And it's good news for the one who's been let down and even let down by the church. And God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son who entered into this world so that whoever believes in him should not perish.

but have eternal life. And so I hope that's woven you up a little bit. Do you understand this Christmas? That Jesus Christ, who many think is just a swear word, who maybe many think has no impact on their lives at all, is actually God's king who died to save sinners.

And there's something very uncomfortable when you realise that. That what you thought about him was wrong and what you thought about yourself was wrong. And it is a humbling thing to live in line with the reality that God is king.

Jesus does not want your sentimentality. And he doesn't want your pity. He wants your worship. What you do before a king, you bow down and you acknowledge, well, you are in charge and I'm not.

And with this king, it's more than that, though, is that you thank this king for dying on the cross for saving sinners and you recognise that he is the only one that can save. And that if he doesn't rescue you, you will perish.

[16:16] And so you can pray to him in your seat this afternoon. There'll be lots that you don't know, but you know enough from tonight to know that you need him. that there is a God in heaven who through his son, Jesus Christ, you can know.

And the last alarming truth, which wasn't scribbled out by the head teacher or the teacher, is this. The message of Advent is he's coming. And so he came the first time to be in humiliation.

He came as a little baby. He helped us. He came in gentleness. He came as saviour. And we love that. But one day he will come again in power and glory and judgment.

And so you and I will meet him. And you might deny that he exists, but it doesn't change a thing.

And so you can either have him as your rescuer and as your saviour, but if you refuse that, you will have him as your judge.

According to the Bible, that is a very shocking thing. The king, the saviour, the son of God. And so don't say it was nice.

[17:31] No one who ever matched Jesus said he was a knight. He's the king, he's the saviour, he's the son of God. Let's pray. Amen.