

P Levy Carol Service 20181216c

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Date: 16 December 2018

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] What do you make of the child in the manger? You've sung of him tonight. You've heard of him in the readings.

What do you make of him? There have been some extraordinary words sung here tonight.! But the words we sing are extraordinary.

Born the king of angels. I said, do you mean that? In those words of another. Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.

What on earth does that mean? Christ, the newborn king. You've sung that tonight. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in you tonight.

Let me read to you a sentence from a letter. It's written by someone who knew nothing of theoretical science. Who never heard of the internet or I'm a celebrity.

[1 : 09] He probably thought the earth was flat if he bothered to think about it. He knew nothing at all thankfully of Brexit. And yet, this sentence, the man who wrote it, understood with remarkable clarity what has so far eluded some of the most brilliant minds in the world.

It's just one sentence from a short letter. And I want to suggest to you that in this sentence, there is more value in this sentence, more of value and importance in this one sentence than in anything that's been discovered by human reason.

More of value in this one sentence than you're going to read anywhere else this Christmas. More of value than anything that's been produced by the most brilliant minds.

There's more importance in this one sentence that comes from a letter written 2,000 years ago by a man named Paul to another guy called Titus. And the sentence runs like this.

It's on the page that you looked at. You can look at it actually on the front page of the carol service. It's just written underneath the date there. And here's the sentence. For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation for all people.

[2 : 25] The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared bringing salvation for all people. There it is. There's the truth.

That at the heart of the universe, it's not a formula, not a great string of formulas, and I'll how it completes. But at the heart of the universe is the grace of God that brings salvation that has appeared for all people.

So think with me, just for a few minutes, about these four things. First of all, it speaks of, doesn't it, the grace of God. We don't use that word much, but that means the generosity of God. The out of the ordinary kindness of God.

The child in the manger means that at the heart of the universe is the kindness and the generosity and the grace of God. Is that what the birth of Jesus means to you?

Does the coming of Jesus Christ mean that you know the kindness of God? As Christmas approaches, and you give your mind just maybe a little bit perhaps to this child in the manger, are you overwhelmed by the fact that God is good towards you?

[3 : 40] Is that what it means? This is, isn't it, the greatest discovery that any human being can make. And it's a discovery that is as discoverable to a small child as it is to the world's most brilliant mind.

To discover and to know the kindness, the grace of God. Not mind you, the soppy sentimentality of God.

We can mistake it for that. Sometimes, particularly by the nonsense of Christmas stories that are told, there is nothing soppy or sentimental about the coming of Jesus Christ into the world.

But it is the undeserved goodness of God to us that He came. And we'll see the why of that in a moment. But can you think for a moment just what a life-changing experience it is to know not just

that God is there, not just to be able to say tonight, well, I believe in God, and not just that God exists, that you've come to that conclusion.

I'm sure that God is really pleased that you've come to that conclusion that He exists. not just that, but to know that that God is both kind and generous and good to you.

[4 : 59] Wouldn't life be very different? For those of us who know that, isn't life very different? But even if you don't know the grace of God yet, can't you see tonight how great it would be to know that God is good towards you?

But why does the child in the manger mean that? It's a great story, as we've got it, full of human interests and pathos, charming images of donkeys and oxen and shepherds and wise men and stars and so on and so on, enough to sell millions of Christmas cards.

But how can this story mean as much as I'm claiming it is? Or as much as when Paul wrote this letter to Titus claimed, how can this story, when I hear it, change my life?

Because it brings me to know the goodness of God to me. Well actually it can't. Not just the story of the birth of Jesus, it can't do that.

And no even tonight, if you realise who the baby is, it won't do that. If you realise that he was no less than God himself, that child in the manger. I will actually only know the grace of God to me and the goodness and kindness and generosity of God if I know why he came.

[6 : 14] And so that's the second thing in our sentence. It's really obvious, isn't it? Do you remember how it went? The grace of God that brings salvation. Jesus came into the world not just to make a visit to planet Earth like a divine holiday or a winter break.

He didn't even come just to make God known. He came to bring salvation. What is salvation? Well, think about that for a moment. It means being saved from something.

And so what do we human beings need to be saved from? Well, some of us tonight we long to be saved from sickness. Maybe that's why you're here. There are many millions in the world today, aren't there tonight, that need to be saved from poverty and from salvation.

Many need to be saved from injustice and oppression. And so many of us tonight need to be saved from fears of many different kinds of things.

And of course we could go on and on couldn't we? We could list the things that you and I need to be saved from. But these things that I've just listed and the hundreds of other things they are actually just symptoms.

[7 : 27] Symptoms that not all is right with the world. And not all is right between the world and God. And all is not right tonight between us and God.

Is it? Before God each one of us is a guilty person. Before God each one of us has got an awful lot to answer for.

Before God each of us has many many reasons to be scared out of our minds. But the child in the manger came in order to become the man who died on the cross in your place and mine.

He came into the world in order to make possible our forgiveness before God. He came to wipe clean slate our debt before God.

He came to bring salvation. And that's why the child in the manger means the incredible goodness and kindness of God to you and me. He came into the world so that you and I can get right with God.

[8 : 35] He came so that we can stand before God confident. He came so that we can stand before God with no fear and no worry. And know that God himself and I we are friends.

Now what I've been saying you might think well this is really nice thoughts isn't it? It's the kind of thing you get used to hearing at Christmas time. But perhaps like many you hear these words and you think well that's just what they are.

They're just words aren't they? The grace of God salvation they're just words just religious words they're the jargon of religion the cliché of the Christian but it's not just words is it?

Because the third thing in the sentence can you see it? The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared it has appeared it's not just religious ideas to entertain those who are religiously inclined or to comfort those who are religious that sort of thing no something has happened this verse says something has happened in history in real time and space at a particular time in a particular place if you and I had been there you and I could have seen it the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared and what does it look like?

Well it looks like a child in a manger who became a man on the cross it isn't a question tonight of do you like these ideas? It isn't a question do I find them congenial?

[10 : 06] Do these words make sense to me? No it is what do I do? What do I do with what has happened? What does it mean that the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared?

It has happened and that is what the child in the manger and the man on the cross are all about and the question is this do you realise the goodness and kindness of God to you?

Do you remember the last words of our sentence the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared and do you remember how it ends? It ends from think on this for a minute for all people it's a historical fact that is accessible to all I keep people I'm meeting people who say to me when I ask them do you go to church they say I'm just not the religious type and maybe you may be like the cow but you're just not the religious type you say but let me just tell you the kind of people that Jesus met with and the kind of people Jesus dealt with when he was on earth he dealt with the lepers the outcasts the demonised the woman everyone wanted to avoid the little cheat Jesus went out of his way to meet with people that weren't the religious type one of my friends wrote this on twitter last week he said oh come all ye faithless joyless and defeated oh come ye oh come ye to Bethlehem

Christmas is for the weary for the messed up and for the broken if your life isn't instagrammable Christmas is for you and maybe tonight you said well actually I'm alright I've got everything to gather and if you have I'm really pleased for you but you're deceiving yourself because whoever you are tonight and whatever you've done and wherever you're from and however you feel the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared for people exactly like you and wouldn't it be a great thing if this time Christmas 2018 was the time that you came to know or came to know afresh the grace of God came to know and understand and came to experience what it is to realise the great goodness of God towards you and that can happen the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared what do you need to do when you need to say thank you don't you to say thank you to God and you need to receive his great kindness to you and you need to stop rebelling against that kindness and be willing to be changed by it as I finish

I want to read you a news article that came out yesterday it's about President George W.H. Bush H.W. Bush he was the president about 30 years ago let me read it to you it's a bit long but you'll be alright it's the last thing I'm going to say nearly 20 years ago former President George H.W.

[13 : 11] Bush wanted to sponsor a Filipino boy named Timothy through Colorado Springs non-profit Compassion International but first he needed a pseudonym he's passed away now so it's probably not classified anymore it was George Walker said Wes Stafford Compassion President Emeritus that's the same name that President Bush used apparently whenever he checked into a hospital and they needed to have it unknown that he was there Bush's security team was worried about Timothy's safety said Stafford if word had gotten out that the child was communicating with a former US president he could have been in danger through Compassion International sponsor writes a letter to a child in addition to providing financial support Bush's letters were intentionally vague to mask his identity and all communication between the two of them went through Stafford who was then President of Compassion the first time he started breaking our little security rules was when he sent a picture of his dog Millie and he added this is Millie she's met lots of famous people

Stafford said laughing and I thought okay that's cute but boy that's starting to slip into some little secrets in there then years later he wrote we're going to have Christmas this year with my son at his house and then he adds oh and he lives in a big white house and I'm like come on Mr.

President you're really pushing the envelope here Bush's sponsorship began around the year 2000 in Washington DC when he was at a Christmas concert featuring a line up of Christian musicians during his admission the performers asked if anyone wanted information about sponsoring a child to everyone's surprise all of a sudden George Sr.

raised his hand in the middle of his security entourage and said I want one the packet was passed down to him and all these security people were like has anybody screened to Timothy Stafford said he hand wrote the letters and even drew pictures to the boy he really threw himself into it he would write to little Timothy and Timothy would write to him and anything that Timothy said that was interesting President Bush would write back with a comment on it thank you for the picture of that beautiful rainbow we had a rainbow like that right outside our house last week he was everything that we wish of all our sponsors would be he was engaged in this little child's life he told Timothy that he loved baseball and golf that he was pretty good at throwing a frisbee he was looking for

common ground and after learning that the boy liked art Bush sent a package of coloured pencils crayons paint sketch pads with a compassion international staff member travelling to the Philippines Bush was a man without fanfare he did excellent things very quietly always giving the credit away to other people

I just loved that about him years later as Bush's schedule became busier and his health began to decline Stafford's executive assistant Angie Laughlock took over his sponsorship then in 2010 when Timothy was Sandin Laughlock and her husband Larry flew to the Philippines to meet him but Laughlock said Timothy is a very quiet shy and sweet spirited guy with a very tender spirit Stafford said he played the guitar in his church worship team Angie is the one who told him your former sponsor is someone that I know pretty well and he was the president of the United States Stafford said and Timothy was defounded he was speechless and he said here's what I want you to know well I knew that he was kind and encouraging and a wonderful man but I had no idea and I thought you know to a child in poverty it's amazing enough that anyone would care about them but it was beyond his wildest imagination and even his ability to comprehend that the president of the [16:51] United States knew his name the truth is there is a God in heaven's night who knows your name and he's not written to you a letter he's not going to be your pen pal but the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to people like you and people like me and so won't you trust him I want you to receive him I want you to thank God for him let's pray