

Carol Service Address

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Preacher: Chris Roberts

[0 : 00] I just want to take a few minutes to explain why we've laid on this carol service today. So the Ealing lunchtime talks, you may have seen the sign outside on a Tuesday, and some members of staff from the Ealing Council have organised this carol service.

And I just want to take 10-15 minutes to explain why. So if you would turn with me to the very middle of your handouts, just a page back from where we had our last reading, to that passage in Luke, Luke chapter 2.

It's just on the left-hand side there. And I just want to look at the second little paragraph in that passage, which begins with the number 10. This is a time of year, isn't it, full of a mixture of different emotions.

So I wonder whether you agree with what the angel says to the shepherd as he brings the message. He says to them, doesn't he, that the news of Jesus' birth is good news of great joy. The shepherds hear that this is what the birth of Jesus is all about. The angel speaks of a gift, doesn't he, that isn't just the fleeting pleasure of Christmas that fades away in January.

[1 : 27] But Jesus is born to give lasting and great joy. I wonder if that is how you feel about the birth of Jesus, if that is how you feel about this time of year.

It is a great big claim to make, isn't it? But to understand this great joy, I think we need to realise two things about this gift that Luke fills us in on here.

The gift God gives, sending his son to be born as a baby, that first Christmas. We need to realise, first of all, that the gift says a lot about us.

The gift says a lot about us. It says things about us, actually, that we don't really want to hear this afternoon. There are some gifts that when you unwrap them, they send us a big message.

There are some gifts that when we open them, they make us feel slightly awkward. And we kind of want to say to the person, what are you trying to say here? If you're given a book which reads, the title is *How Not To Be Selfish*.

[2 : 39] Or you open a dieting DVD or a fitness video. Some gifts, we receive them like that, don't we? And we've kind of got to swallow our pride a little bit.

Last year, just after the talk, this talk, same time, same place last year, someone brought me a book on how to give better talks. And I kind of opened that and thought, what are you trying to say here? Slightly awkward, isn't it? And gifts like that don't necessarily make us feel joyful, do they? They make us feel awkward, or maybe even a little bit angry.

And it's like that for many with the gift of Jesus Christ. Because this gift tells us things about ourselves that actually we don't want to admit.

The angel says to the shepherds that the gift is the arrival of a saviour who is Christ the Lord. And he says to them, Jesus is born as somebody who will rescue you from your worst problems.

[3 : 48] And we think, great, don't we? But the shepherds understand that their greatest problem was not their financial situation, it wasn't their political situation, or their social problems, or any of that.

But their greatest problem was their failure to live in God's world as they should. Their worst problem was God's great love of all that is right, and his hatred of all that is wrong.

And they knew that they were definitely not on the right side of that. They realised that they owe God their whole lives as his creatures.

They owe him more than they can possibly pay him back. So as we kind of take the wrapping off this gift, we might think, ooh, ooh, that is awkward.

I'm actually pretty insulted by this gift. I'm pretty insulted that this preacher guy is standing in front of me right now, and he says that God thinks I need saving from that.

[4 : 55] That God says I need saving from the terrible consequences of not living as I should in his world. And that the gift comes to be my Lord and my ruler.

This gift, rather than making me feel joyful about myself, is actually an indictment on myself. It tells me things about myself I don't want to hear, quite frankly.

Somebody once said that the wise person is a person who hears what they don't want to hear. But it is for this reason that so often Jesus Christ is an unwanted gift.

Because the gift God sends tells us a lot about ourselves. That's the first thing we need to realise. The second and the last thing that we need to realise is that actually the gift tells us much, much more about the giver than it tells us about ourselves.

The gift tells us much, much, much more about God who gives the gift. Did you notice how the angel gives directions to find this gift, to find the Lord Jesus?

[6 : 17] He says, doesn't he, this will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

That's the signpost. It makes the point, doesn't it, that this is a real person, in a real place, someone who is findable, who they can actually meet.

This gift is a particular person who fits a particular description. He is not just a feeling or a sentimental religious hope, but a real, particular, unique person who you can meet.

But what is really strange about the sign is the unusual thing that they say about where they will find this baby. It's not the fact that he is wrapped in swaddling cloths.

There would have been quite a few babies in Bethlehem, I'd imagine, wrapped up like that. But I don't imagine that many of them would have been where the baby Jesus would have been found.

[7 : 26] You will find him in a manger. In a manger. That word, manger, it comes from the Latin, meaning to eat.

It's a bit like the French, isn't it? If my GCSE French is any good, it's manger, isn't it? Prêt à manger, ready to eat. It's basically a feeding trough.

A manger, a manger. The manger is a sign not only of where he is, but of who he is. The gift tells us more about him than actually it tells us about us.

It tells us about who he is as the giver. And he is maybe not the kind of lord and saviour that we were looking for and that we expect, is he? He is not a lord like all the lords of the world.

He is not a proud lord. But he is a humble lord. He is not a remote emperor stuck in some ivory tower somewhere, but a close saviour.

[8 : 35] He is lowly. There's a famous painting, if you're into art, by a Renaissance artist called Holman Hunt.

And the painting is called The Shadow of the Cross. It's a great painting. In that painting, it shows a man who is in a carpenter's shop. And it's Jesus and his mother is there.

And there are wood shavings all over the floor and tools strewn everywhere. And the painting depicts the man stretching his arms out, measuring something maybe.

But when you look again at the painting, you see that this man is casting a shadow. And that shadow, it lines up perfectly with a beam of wood that is on the back of the workshop with nails in it.

What is Holman Hunt's point? It is that the baby who was born in Bethlehem grew up as a man, didn't he? He grew up to be a carpenter, working a normal job in a carpenter's workshop.

[9 : 39] But that man lived a life with a shadow hanging over him. It was the shadow of his sacrificial death.

The shadow of the cross. And God says, doesn't he, you owe me more than you can afford for living how you have in my world.

But in this gift, he adds to that, doesn't he? He says, I am willing to pay. I am willing to pay the debt that you owe to me with the most valuable thing that I can afford, my life.

And so if you think about it, the whole course of Jesus' life is very poignant, really. Because he is born in a manger, which is going to be made of wood, and he dies at the end on a wooden cross.

From start to finish, his whole life says to us that he is a Lord and Saviour of a different kind. He is a Lord and Saviour who not only deserves your obedience, but he wins your admiration.

[10 : 51] He doesn't just demand your submission, but he stirs up your adoration and your delight and your thanks and your praise.

He is Aragorn, not Sauron. He is King Richard, not the Sheriff of Nottingham. He is Aslan, not the White Witch.

He is the kind of King and Saviour, Lord and Saviour, that we long for. He is a King who was born in a feeding trough. And notice, as soon as that word manger is used in the passage, it is at that moment, with that word, that all of the other angels burst on the scene and start praising God. As if to say, is this what you imagined your Lord and your Saviour to look like? He is a Lord and Saviour who is willing to get himself dirty, who has been willing to involve himself with you and to share in your mess and to rescue you from it.

And so look at him there and honestly, does he look like a kind of Lord and Saviour whose main mission is to make you feel got at? Whose main mission is to kind of lord it over you and oppress you?

[12 : 16] The gift does that, doesn't it, in a way, as it reveals our need, but the manger tells us that he is humble and he is a Saviour and he is a servant king come to rescue you and to win what actually he deserves from you, your affection and your praise.

Just as I close, the story is told of a family in New York State who had a painting on their wall for quite a few years and they needed some space for some more photographs so they kind of moved this painting and strangely enough they shoved it down the back of a sofa.

Strange place to put it. It was a painting of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus. Years later though, one family member wanted to know what this painting was about and so they inquired, they took it to an expert and discovered that it was painted by some guy called Michelangelo.

That painting is now estimated to be worth up to £190 million down the back of a sofa. The problem with all of this, isn't it, is that this gift is ignorable.

Isn't it? And something deep inside us says, don't open it. Something inside us says, just get through this, wait till this guy stops talking, we can sing the last carol and get out of here.

[13 : 45] And I can pack this gift away in the attic for another year with the decorations. And I can shove it down the back of a settee. But we want to say to you, to shove Jesus down the settee is a massive mistake.

God sent Jesus not to give you good advice or good teaching or good life coaching, but he came to give you good news. Good news of great joy.

And isn't it joy that people are looking for at this time of year? It's what we all want, isn't it? Joy. C.S. Lewis, who wrote the Narnia book, said that pleasure is often in our power joy, but joy rarely is.

But God comes to you and he gives you this precious gift. A gift that, yes, we need to swallow our pride and receive. A gift of a Lord and a Saviour to surpass all of our expectations.

The King of a manger. So, will you receive him this Christmas? Will you receive this gift of great joy? Let me lead us in a short prayer and then we'll sing our final carol.