

Town Hall Carol Service

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Well again, let me welcome you. My name is Paul Levy. I'm the Minister of the International Presbyterian Church in West Ealing. And we run the Ealing lunchtime talks we meet here every Tuesday and have a talk from the Bible for 20 minutes or so.

I wonder what you want for Christmas. I wonder what's on your wish list for this year. One man who had to answer that question 60 years ago was the UK's Ambassador to Washington, Sir Oliver Franks.

He'd recently arrived in Washington DC and in November his secretary said she received a telephone call from the editor of the Washington Post. He wanted to know what the Ambassador wanted for Christmas.

Sir Oliver didn't realise that was a tradition between journalists and diplomats in the States and he was touched. Nonetheless, he realised that he needed to get his request absolutely right. It had to be something that was tasteful but not too expensive. This was post-war rationing time.

It had to be something that was eye-catching but not too controversial. And above all, it had to be something quintessentially British and yet not too dull. So he talked it over with his senior staff and they agreed that he should ask for a box of crystallised fruits.

[1 : 17] And then he forgot all about it. That was until the Christmas Eve edition of the Washington Post ran a front page article entitled What the World Wants for Christmas. They'd conducted a survey of all the world's leading ambassadors in the United States.

The Russian ambassador said he wanted an end to famine and injustice. The French ambassador said he wanted world peace and an end to conflict.

The German ambassador said he wanted economic prosperity. But not to be outdone, the British ambassador said that he wanted a box of crystallised fruit. I wonder what you want for Christmas. For the next few minutes we're going to look at the passage that was just read to us by Ralph. It's taken from Matthew's eyewitness account of Jesus' life and death and resurrection.

And the question I want us to think about this lunchtime and the middle time we've got left is what is so great about Christmas? What is so great about Christmas? And what I want to do by looking at that passage that you've got in front of you is see three shocking truths.

[2 : 24] Number one shocking truth is that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Can you see that? If you look at verse one that we just saw, it's the little one on your sheet. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.

Now I guess it's not much of a surprise to us, is it? We heard about the donkey, Mary riding on the donkey to Bethlehem, all those sorts of things. We're kind of used to the fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

But let me say it in a way that would have the same shock that this would have had for the first readers. If we thought of the equivalent in the UK, Jesus was born in Slough.

Or Jesus was born in Peckham. Or Hull. Now if you live in Slough or Peckham or Hull, let me apologise. But even you will have one place in your mind, won't you?

That you could never imagine anyone famous coming from. It's that kind of place. You see, these foreign visitors, they went to, verse one, Jerusalem. Because that is where they expected the king to be.

[3 : 33] It was the capital city. It was the city of the greatest king, David. And yet they discovered they'd gone to the wrong place. So they needed to ask for directions. It would be like you and I going to Downing Street.

Or going to Buckingham Palace. And being told, no, no, no. This isn't where you're to come. You're to go to Slough or to Peckham or to Hull. It would be something of a surprise, wouldn't it? But notice

with you that Jesus was born as it had been promised.

Can you see the little number five? Verse five. We're told there, in Bethlehem, in Judea. That's where he's born. For this is what the prophets have written. And then there follows a quotation from the prophet Micah.

Written hundreds of years before Jesus' birth. And with so much of the birth of Jesus. And the life of Jesus. And the death of Jesus.

And the resurrection of Jesus. We're told about it hundreds of years before it happens. So that you and I, we don't need to be in any doubt over who this is.

[4 : 38] So hundreds of years beforehand, we're told he would be born in Bethlehem. We're told hundreds of years before he would be of the tribe of Judah. Hundreds of years before we're told that he would be born miraculously to a virgin.

Hundreds of years before we're told that he would grow up and do amazing miracles. That he would be betrayed by his friends. That he'd be crucified with criminals. For silver.

Hundreds of years before we're told that his hands would be pierced. And his feet would be pierced. But there'd be no broken bones in his death on the cross. We're told hundreds of years before that he would be buried with the rich when he dies.

And yet three days later he would rise again to new life. Do you see we're told all of this hundreds of years before the event.

So that when we read it in the gospels we should be in no doubt who this Jesus is. He is the king. Promised by God. Who is none other than God in human flesh.

[5 : 46] And so if you are our guest we're really grateful that you're here today. And you took away one of these gospels. One of these Matthew's gospels which are on the table at the door.

And if you were to read this gospel over the Christmas period. You would find that Jesus makes the most extraordinary claims about himself. You would see that Jesus modelled the most perfect character.

You would see that Jesus displays divine conduct. And all of them reinforcing that Jesus, how does verse 6 put it?

That Jesus has come as God's shepherd. And ruler of his people. The primary emphasis of these verses is the very ordinary place that Jesus is born.

I wonder if you've ever thought about that. Why would the great divine being. Why would the creator of the heaven and earth shrink himself to a few cells in a virgin's womb?

[6 : 52] Why would he allow himself to be born a baby? To allow himself to grow up in a tradesman's home. In the middle of nowhere. In a provincial part of Palestine. Jesus is demonstrating and showing you what God is like.

He is showing us that God is humble. He is a servant. He is not a tyrant. Who longs to crush us. And dominate us. And beat us into submission.

This ordinary baby. Grows up to be an ordinary man. Who later in the gospels we read. Washing his disciples dirty feet. And that first Easter.

He dies on a cross. To swap places. With ordinary people like you and me. That's the second great shock really. The first great shock is that Jesus is born in Bethlehem.

But the second great shock is that he is hated by Herod. Born in Bethlehem. Hated by Herod. This little defenseless baby. Is hunted down.

[7 : 57] By the most powerful person in the country in a brutal way. So look at a little verse 7. Just look down there. It says. Then Herod. Called the Magi secretly. And found out from them.

The exact time that the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem. And said. Go and make a careful search for the child. And as soon as you find him. Report to me. That I too may go and worship him. As if he wants to do anything of the sort.

And it's strange isn't it. That a king. Would feel so threatened by a baby. It could have been that. Herod was an Ilymian. And not Jewish. So he was fearful always of a real king. Of the Jews being born. It could be that. But verse 3.

Describes King Herod. As being disturbed. Troubled. It's an English understatement. Herod was a paranoid tyrant. He killed his wife.

[8 : 57] A couple of his sons. And several other rivals for the throne. He was seriously disturbed. Now he was devious too. And when verse 8 says to the wise man. Go and find him.

And let me know. So that I can go and worship him too. We know that he's got no intention of doing that. In fact we know don't we. A few verses later. Herod sends his soldiers into Bethlehem. To kill every baby. But why? Why was he so violent? Why did King Herod hate Jesus so much? And a simple answer is that Herod understood something of who Jesus is. Herod was the king. Herod ran the show.

Herod was the boss. And he didn't like people telling him what to do. And that attitude hasn't died out with Herod has it? It's there in the life of Jesus.

[9 : 54] We see it with the religious people. The most moral men and women oppose Jesus' rule. It's there at the point of Jesus' death.

When all the great pillars of the establishment. The religious and the political ruling class. Kill Jesus. Why? Because they are threatened by His rule.

They don't want Him to be king. And if we're honest today. That attitude is in my heart. And your heart to a degree. We don't slaughter children do we?

Of course not. But we just don't want Jesus to be Lord. Let me tell you about a boy who wrote to Jesus one December.

He sat down in the city room. And he said dear Jesus. I've been a good boy for a whole year. Please give me a bite for Christmas. He thought about it for a little while.

[10 : 57] And the little boy realised. I've not been good for a whole year. I know that. So he started again. He said dear Jesus. I've been good for a whole. And then he realised.

He hadn't been good for a whole month. And he hadn't been good for a whole week. And he hadn't even been good for a whole day. And his mum and dad knew that he hadn't been good. So how on earth was this child going to fool Jesus?

The little boy who's writing this letter becomes worried. He looks around the sitting room. Which is all decorated for Christmas. And he saw the Christmas tree. And beside it he saw the little nativity scene.

He wanders over to the nativity set. Over to the crib seat. And he picks up the figure of Mary. Jesus' mother. And he pops her into his pocket.

And then he sat down to write an altogether different letter. Dear Jesus. If you want your mother back. Give me a fight for Christmas. The Bible says that none of us.

[11 : 58] That none of us could write a letter to Jesus today. Saying I've been good for a whole year. Or a whole month. Or a whole day. We don't need to kill people to prove that to him.

We just need to shut Jesus out for much of the year. We'll give him a look in over Christmas. We'll come to the carol service. We'll enjoy mulled wine. But then we'll pack him away with the tinsel and the fairy lights for a whole year.

Do you see Jesus was hated by Herod. And Jesus is still rejected today by those who feel threatened by him. Threatened by his rule.

And that is why he was called Jesus. Did you notice that earlier? Why is he called Jesus? For he will save his people from their sins.

From their rejection of him. From that great sin of shutting him out of our lives. And blocking his rightful rule. We love rescue stories don't we?

[13 : 03] There's a rescue story on the BBC website this morning. Of a British backpacker who was abducted. In Australia. And she's put in the back of a car. And she gets her mobile phone out.

And she texts her father. In Britain. And tells her where she's going. And she is rescued by the police. It's a great story. We love rescue. And she could say this Christmas day.

If it wasn't for my father informing the police. I wouldn't be here. Or the Polish lady. Margot Drotter. Who finally got to thank her 105 year old rescuer.

In October. The reporter Claire Hollingworth. Who saved Margot from the Nazis. And she can say this Christmas. If it wasn't for Claire.

I wouldn't be here this Christmas. She's my rescuer. There are people celebrating Christmas. Knowing that only a lives day. Because of what someone else has done.

[14 : 03] And that's what it means to be a Christian. That we realise. That Jesus died on the cross. That he didn't just die to save some other people out there.

But he died to save me. To rescue me. That he died for ordinary men and women like you and I. And he did that. Because God loves his people passionately.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Hated by Herod. And then finally the last shock. Is he's worshipped by a wise man. Look at verse 10. He said.

When coming to the house. They saw the child with his mother. And they bowed down. And they worshipped him. And then they opened their treasures. And presented him with gifts of gold. And incense. And myrrh. What on earth must have Mary thought?

If you've got children. You've probably had the experience like we've had. We've got three kids of our own. And when neighbours came. And friends popped round. They brought a baby girl. Or booties. Or bubble bath.

[15:00] Maybe a glass of champagne. But here we have eastern rulers. Eastern philosophers. And they bring fabulously expensive gifts. At the end of a journey lasting several months.

It's as if Mohammed. And Confucius. And Buddha. Three eastern philosophers. Bowed in homage. Before baby Jesus.

Think of all the greatest Britons that have ever lived. Winston Churchill. Elizabeth I. Benjamin Brunel. Simon Cowell.

All those kind of greats. Come and bow before the Christmas baby. And they don't bow because it's a baby.

They're not sentimentalists. They could have found a baby anyway. Couldn't they? They don't travel the length and breadth of the world to find a baby. It was all to do with who this baby is. God's promised.

[16:03] Saviour King. It was all to do with who this baby would become. The ruler of heaven and earth. And wise men and women still do the same today.

And they give him magnificent gifts. Don't they? Gold for a king. Frankincense which would be offered to God. Myrrh for a burial. Perhaps an indication of the death that Jesus would die.

But as we finish. Let me ask you this question at the end of this lunchtime talks. What will you do with the baby this year? What will you do? Will you ask the questions?

That this man asked. Where can we find him? With these three shocks in mind. That he was born in Bethlehem. That he was hated by Herod. That he was worshipped by wise men. You couldn't do better than taking this gospel away with you.

Grab a handful of Quality Streets. Take a gospel. Read one of the eyewitness accounts. Of who Jesus is and what he is. What he's done. Come back. In the Tuesdays. In the New Year's.

[17:08] We look at the claims of Jesus. Every Tuesday. At 10 past a week. Take this DVD if you're not a reader. And watch the message of Christmas. Whatever you do.

Don't do what Thelma Howard did. Did you know Thelma Howard? Thelma Howard was a housekeeper for a wealthy film producer in Hollywood. Every Christmas.

She assumed that no care went into her present. They were just small little brown envelopes. That she assumed was a thank you note or a voucher from her boss.

She didn't even bother to open them. Every Christmas. She threw the little brown envelopes into the bottom drawer of her desk. And as a result. Thelma Howard never discovered.

That they were a rather very special gift. From her boss. A man who went by the name of Walter William Disney. They were shares.

[18:05] In the embryonic Disney Corporation. Tragically. When Thelma Howard died in poverty. In 1981. After she died. The estate went in. They emptied the drawers.

And opened all the envelopes. And they were shocked to discover. That Thelma Howard died. Owning shares in the Disney Corporation. Worth 6 million pounds. Isn't it tragic? She had no idea. Of the value of the Christmas present she'd been given. And one of the tragedies in working a city like this. Is I meet men and women every week of the year. Who make the same mistake.

They make the same mistake with the greatest Christmas present ever given. The person of Jesus. Who is a rescuer. And who is a ruler. And they've never bothered to unwrap the gift.

And people who go through life thinking they know it all. Or at least they've written off Lord Jesus without looking into him. Don't leave the greatest gift unwrapped this Christmas.

[19:06] Let's pray.