

S Cashman Luke 2 v14 16-12-2012 Christmas Carol Service

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Preacher: Stuart Cashman

[0 : 00] Well, it's inspired songs, plays, poems, sculptures, numerous memorial events.

! For others, it's caused controversy.! It's been mythologized, sanitized, commercialized, made famous by Sainsbury's, hence the commercialization of it.

And certainly around that truth, truths have grown up, haven't they? I think as a boy growing up in this country, I was aware of them. I think I'd always been led to believe there was some kind of big England-Germany football match which didn't end in penalties for a change, and that it was all organized.

But it wasn't like that at all. And the truth has, of course, been sanitized. The Sainsbury's advert looks nice, but in reality, during that peace it came briefly, after weeks of torrential rain.

So while some fraternized and played football, many were digging, burying the dead, shoring up the trenches, ready for the fighting that would continue. And yes, it has been commercialized.

[1 : 18] So how do we know about it? How do we know any truth about that truth? What we know is, of course, from the eyewitness accounts of the time. For example, Ted Berryman, who was aged 31 at that point in World War I, wrote back to his mother, saying this, I haven't much news to tell you, except an extraordinary thing which happened on Christmas Day.

To begin, on Christmas Eve, all the German trenches were lined with little lights, which we afterwards discovered were Christmas trees. Well, next morning we heard them singing and shouting in their trenches, and about midday, they began lifting up hats and sticks, and showing them above the trenches.

Then, they showed their heads, and then bodies. And finally, they climbed out of the trenches into the open. He goes on to talk about the talking and laughing and swapping, backing of cigarettes, biscuits, etc.

He concludes, You would never believe that we had been fighting for weeks. After about an hour, their officers shoot them back into their trenches, and we came back to ours. What is it about that little truce, short-lived, and brief as it was, that inspires so much art, so much talk, so much advertising even?

Why does it capture our imaginations? I guess in part, it's a reminder to us that amidst the brutality of war, human beings are still capable of beautiful acts.

[2 : 50] I suppose also it resonates with us, because it's a tale of the insignificant little people, standing up and forcing some peace. It didn't happen another Christmas.

The generals made sure of that. But surely the reason it really captures our imagination, the reason Sainsbury's want to use it for advertising, is that actually it echoes in our hearts, doesn't it?

We all long for peace in a world that is so brutal. Just yesterday morning, a number of people went out for a nice peaceful coffee in the cafe Lint in Sydney, and found themselves besieged.

Siege ending in a bit of a bloodbath. It's bad news everywhere, isn't it? On the front of the metro this morning, the headline, Run for your life, as the Taliban hit the school in Pakistan.

So it's nice to think that in the midst of violence, in the midst of brutality, peace can break out. Even if that peace has been sanitised.

[3 : 55] Even if the ideas of it were sanitised. And of course, it was so short-lived, wasn't it? Another eyewitness account reads like this. Rifleman Ede of the 3rd Rifle Brigade recounted a German bidding him a prophetic farewell.

Today we have peace, said the German soldier. Tomorrow you fight for your country, I fight for mine. Good luck. So brief.

So brief. Where is lasting peace? And what do you think accounts for both the beauty and the brutality that we as human beings are able to show to each other?

What explains that dynamic of the beauty and the brokenness, the brutality and the beautiful things? Well, this story of peace, these truces, is a powerful one, isn't it?

And of course, it's particularly resonant at this time of year. The reason they had a bit of peace at this time of year is that Christmas is a time for peace. And that wasn't invented 100 years ago, but that goes right back to the very first Christmas.

[4 : 57] It goes back to those words that Ralph read to us, that the angels sung. Just back a page on your service sheet. What did the angels say? Suddenly a great company of a heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God of the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.

I wonder, what would peace look like for you this Christmas? Would it mean a break from the shopping? Would it mean a break from the frenetic work deadlines? I'm sure we've all heard that old gag about why were Mary and Joseph unable to find an inn to stay in Bethlehem?

Answer? Because it was Christmas, and it's always busy at Christmas. They should have booked ahead the lastminute.com or something. But as well as peace from busyness, we'd love peace, even in our families, if not in the whole world, wouldn't we?

Some of us would be desperate for that. And of course, many dismiss the Christmas story, because this peace seems so far-fetched. It's a story that seems like those true stories, to be mythologised, to be sanitised, to be commercialised.

Well, we see the commercialisation of the story everywhere, don't we? We can also see the sanitisation of it. Look at any Christmas card. If it does have Jesus on it, it's a perfect stable, with beautiful cartoon animals.

[6 : 21] You can't smell the manure. You can't smell the fear of a teenage girl giving birth to her first child. You don't get a whiff of the scandal of an unmarried girl being pregnant and giving birth.

She was a brave girl. Surely she was. It's sanitised, the version we get. And yes, myths go up about it. Sometimes it's hard to tell Santa Claus from the truth, isn't it? And even in the readings we've had, that last reading that Penny read to us, the wise men.

How many wise men were there? Three, we all think. But the Bible never says that. It doesn't talk about camels. It just says, Magi, wise men from the east, came with three gifts.

So yes, there are myths, there are legends. There is a sanitised version. And yet there are also eyewitness accounts. And that's what these, which we've read today, are.

They are eyewitness accounts of what happened on that day. Did you notice that reading with the angels on that previous page ends with these words, Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

[7 : 32] Luke, who wrote that account of Jesus' life, says at the start of his account that he set about to write an orderly account, going back to the witnesses. No doubt he interviewed Mary herself to be able to write this account of the birth of Jesus.

So yes, there may be myth. It may be sanitised. It is certainly commercialised. And underneath it all, there are eyewitness accounts, bearing witness to the truth of it, as to the truth of those brief Christmas treacings.

But what of this peace? What of this peace on earth? Where does it come from? What does it look like? Well, if you want to discover what that peace is, you need to look on in the story.

Read through the accounts of Jesus' life. What peace does he bring people? Well, you can read on through Luke's account. In chapter 7, we hear him speaking peace to a woman who'd been ostracised by her community.

She's known simply as a sinful woman, possibly a prostitute, judged by the religious leaders. Yet Jesus speaks peace to her. In the following chapter, he speaks peace to a woman with a terrible medical condition that no one had been able to help.

[8 : 42] In the brokenness of her life, cut off from her community, Jesus speaks peace and wholeness. In the midst of a storm, men terrified for their lives, he speaks peace.

In a world where even nature seems to be against us. And towards the end of his earthly life, as he walks into Jerusalem, he weeps over the state of the city and says this, If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace, but now it is hidden from your eyes.

What was it that could bring them peace? It was what he was about to do as he went into Jerusalem. To die an undeserved death after a sham trial.

Dying for trumped up charges. In a sense, Jesus was putting his head above the trenches, walking towards the enemy fire, dying so that he could bring peace. See, the Bible, Christianity, teaches us that the reason there isn't peace in our world is that actually we do not have peace with God.

We're all, each one of us, at war with God. So for peace to come, that war needs to end. For our war with God to end, God himself needs to come and make peace.

[9 : 58] God himself needs to pay the price for peace. And peace is a costly business, isn't it? But that's how Jesus brings peace. If you look just briefly as we close what the shepherds did with this news of peace.

If you look back to that reading, in verse 15, my little 15, they say, when the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about.

So they hurried off. They'd heard great news of great joy for all people. They didn't just go back to their sheep and back to their jobs and back to the mundane things of life.

They took time out. They hurried to investigate the truth of this. And when they went there, what did they find? They found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger.

It didn't look significant. But it corroborated the message of the angels. It showed them there was truth and reality in what the angels had said. If I promised you a million pounds today, you would probably be cynical and say, I don't think you can do that.

[11 : 11] And you'd be right. But surely, unless you're fairly cynical, you'd at least want to come and find out whether I actually am the world's richest man described as a poor guy and you'd like.

Surely if there's good news, isn't it worth investigating? We want to invite you to do that. We're going to run a course after Christmas called Christianity Explored. It allows you to look at the eyewitness accounts for Jesus.

It allows you to ask any question you want to ask because you want to get to the reality of this. It will be held here in the town hall on Thursday's details on the sheet. Do you talk to me or anyone else you've seen up front if you'd like to find out more?

It's interesting. Those Christmas truces were once just seemed like a legend. There was a man named Stanley Weintraub, a historian who wrote a book on the First World War.

As he was finishing the end of the research for that book, he said this, I discovered a truce apparently occurred at Christmas 1914, but most historians scoffed.

[12 : 13] It was largely considered rumour and legend, but impelled by curiosity, I was determined to explore the truce. Histories were of little help. The phrase Christmas truce failed to appear in the indices of almost all of them.

Where gunfire allegedly ceased at Christmas, it was dismissed as little consequence. Yet, when I explored the letters, the diaries and memoirs, I found intriguing evidences of its reality.

When you explore Christianity, explore this Jesus and his offer of peace and joy, I believe you will find intriguing evidences of its reality.

If you don't look at him, where will you look for peace, where will you look for joy this Christmas?

Let's stand and sing our final carol.