

Carol Service Talk

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Well again, for those who came in a little bit later, I welcome you to our carol service. I wish you all a very happy Christmas. We're really pleased that you could be with us this evening.

I'm going to speak to you one sentence. It's a sentence, you can see it on your sheet. If you just look down there, this saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. That Christ Jesus came into the world and saved sinners.

And I think this is one sentence that cuts through all the nostalgia, all the magic of Christmas, all the trimmings, and speaks quite clearly, a little bit like a cold breeze, about the meaning of Christmas. Christ Jesus came into the world and saved sinners. I've got three points, I hope, in ten minutes. And my first point is this, it's a message that you can rely on. A message that you can rely on. That's how it starts.

If you look at that, the saying is trustworthy and deserving of all acceptance. Christmas is so sentimental, isn't it? And the magic of Christmas, whatever that is.

[1 : 12] Nativity place, I was at three school days on Friday. It was a very, very long day. One was a nativity which bore some resemblance after the Christmas story.

Another one was based loosely on the X factor and strictly. And thirdly was a medley of the beaten little songs. Christmas is so much, isn't it? About sentiment and about nostalgia.

But it's very, very clear that as you read the biblical accounts, it is not a myth. You see what Paul says here, as the writer of 1 Timothy chapter 1.

He says, it is reliable and deserving of full acceptance. It's sure. It's trustworthy. It's deserving of your acceptance. This sentence is written about 70 years after the birth of Jesus.

And he talks here about a judgment, a verdict, that is reliable. Believe me on this one. You can trust me on this one, he says. It's not just the truth from me, but it is the truth.

[2 : 14] It is credible. There is evidence. Christ Jesus came into the world. And so what I'm asking you to believe tonight, and what this church is asking you to believe, is not something fantastical.

It isn't Disney. It isn't myth. It's not a fairy story. It isn't nice for you to believe. It isn't once upon a time.

It is that at one point in time, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And so Christianity doesn't ask you to switch off your brain.

Take a step into the dark. No, it asks you to consider the evidence. It asks you to look at the first hand sources. We've got Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

I think we're out of Gospels of John, but they're on the way out. We would love you to take one.

We'd love you to read the evidence. Don't dismiss it. Dismiss it. Without having looked at the evidence. A message you can rely on.

[3 : 14] Secondly, a message for sinners. For sinners. It's at this point, those who invited you, those who may be brought to you, get a little bit uncomfortable.

Because the New Testament, the Bible, doesn't earn great marks for diplomacy. The Bible is blunt and to the point. And maybe you say, well I don't believe what the Bible says about God.

But I want to turn the question around this evening. And I want to ask, do you believe what the Bible says about humans? Because Christmas only makes sense when you listen to what God says about human beings.

I'll never need a rescuing Christ if I don't understand that word sinner. And sinner is a bleak word, isn't it?

I know Christmas is meant to be a festive time and full of good cheer. I understand that. But it is a really startling thought that if there weren't sinners, there would be no Christmas, would there?

[4 : 24] Because what is Christmas about, do you remember, are verses that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Sin and sinners are technical terms. So when you and I talk about our faults and our failings, we use language like this, don't we?

We think of how I let myself down. We're willing to admit how I've hurt others. But when the Bible speaks of sin, it's not just those things.

They're true, aren't they? How I've let myself down, how I've hurt others. But the main point is how I've offended God. How I've pushed God to one side. How I've handed God his redundancy papers, his P45.

And I've pushed him to one side. And I've flouted him. I've run my own life my own way. And I've lived as a rebel in his world.

And I've said very clearly, I want to be in charge. There's a dark side to Christmas. There's a dark side to Christmas that many of us will experience this holiday season.

[5 : 33] And it's as a result of sin. And we live in a world that has been affected by sin. And relationships have been damaged by it.

And it's not just out there, is it? It's in here. And so often we find ourselves, don't we, at odds with ourselves. And at odds with others.

Christmas is famous for that. But underlying those facts, we are at odds with God. The Bible tells you that your heart and my heart is deceitful.

And we are desperately good at kidding ourselves that I'm okay. Other people might have the problem, but I'm certainly not.

And if we do that, we're having ourselves on this evening. Unless we're willing to put ourselves in this category, Christmas will always baffle me. Jesus will have nothing to offer me.

[6 : 34] I'll end up celebrating the wrong thing. In fact, I won't know why I'm celebrating. I'm just glad of a day off. But Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

And if you're not a sinner, there's nothing to celebrate. The third thing is a message of rescue. Christ Jesus came into the world to save.

To rescue sinners. And I know that people get very nervous, don't they, about Christians using the word save. But we actually use the word all the time.

I've come across the word save a number of times this week. I read of a boxer who was saved by the bell. I read of a company saved by an injection of cash.

I read of a school saved by the parents. Or by the education department. Depends who you believe. I read of an old historic building that may or may not be saved in a redevelopment.

[7 : 34] I read of MPs saved by their constituents. I had a discussion with someone about some whale that had been saved. And the one thing that was in common with all of those is that those who were being saved were all helpless.

None of them got themselves out of their mess. They were all saved by someone or something from outside. Of course, there's no different here.

The frightening thing is that sin is not only all-encompassing and all-pervasive. It is definitely serious. And this one sentence, can you look with me again?

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. It tells you and I how much we matter to God. You may have come here tonight with a hundred reasons why you think your life is meaningless.

And why you don't think that you matter. Or that you're not cared for. Well, this sentence is one very powerful and weighty reason to put in the other side of the scale.

[8 : 37] The whole Christian story. The whole Christmas story. The whole fact of Jesus of Nazareth. That he left heaven for a stable in Bethlehem.

And he went on and he suffered and was abused and crucified as a criminal to save sinners. To rescue you. As if I want to say, God doesn't care for me, I've got to write all that off.

It's a message which does tell me how bad my track record is. But it shows me how much it took to rescue me. One writer said this.

If our basic need was education, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need was money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need was technology, God would have sent us a scientist.

If our greatest need was pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was for forgiveness. And so God sent us a saviour. To be a sinner is to be under threat.

[9 : 40] To be under threat of the judgement of God. And lots of laugh at it. And many people are offended by it. But I do well to remember that this Christmas story. That God has sent his son into the world to rescue me from that judgement.

It's a message to be relied on. A message for sinners. And a message of rescue. I expect some of you have never engaged with this message before.

I enjoy Christmas. Good for you. But you've never actually sat down and considered the evidence. I want to really encourage you tonight. Read the sources. Take one of these Gospels home. Take a home. Take an hour. And read it for yourself. But maybe you're not a reader. Maybe you realise that you need to do something about this tonight. And you'd like to find out more. Maybe it's a puzzle to you. We'd love to help you in that. In your seat. You should see. If you just look down by yourself. You should see that there's contact cards. These contact cards.

[10 : 43] And one of the things that we do here. Is we run a course called Christianity Explored. Which is really looking into what Christianity teaches. It's a chance for you to ask any questions that you want.

And we would love if you wanted to do that course. It's a six week course. Or maybe you just want to meet up with someone. And chat about it over a cup of tea. Do fill in one of these. We'd love you to fill them in. And drop them in.

There's a grey box. I think it's grey. Or it's slightly brown by the door. And drop that in. And we'll get in touch. Just fill in your name. Or your phone number. Surely if this is true.

It's worth looking into. Isn't it? But maybe tonight you've realised. Tonight that you need rescuing. That Jesus came into the world to rescue people like you and me.

That you're willing to admit. That you're a sinner like I am. And I realise that that is pretty revolutionary isn't it? But it's even more extraordinary than that.

[11 : 41] That if you will ask God tonight to forgive you. And for the Lord Jesus to rescue you. Wonderfully you will. And you can experience a revolution in your life.

Of being forgiven by God. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. It's a reliable message. It's a message for sinners.

It's a message of rescue. And the true Christmas message. Leads to a revolution. And so have a revolutionary Christmas. We're going to sing.