

Christmas Carol Service

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[0 : 00] Please take your seats and do turn to the readings that were from Luke's Gospel, chapter 2, pages 7 and 9. That's where we're going to be these few minutes this evening.

Well, I need to begin by telling you that I went down the rabbit hole this week with Christmas adverts. It started with John Lewis, then Liddle, then Waitrose.

And as I clicked over to Sainsbury's, momentum was beginning to gather, and so Morrisons and M&S; followed pretty quickly with great ease. Then I discovered top 10 Christmas adverts of 2023 on YouTube.

And I got stuck on the Swiss online pharmacy chain, Doc Morris. If you haven't seen it, you need to see it. It's a beautiful advert. As adverts go, it's right up there.

Now, I don't know if you've seen the ads this Christmas. We've got a Venus flytrap. We've got Graham Norton. We've got singing oven gloves. We've got the woman from Ted Lasso. She's on there.

[1 : 06] And we've got Sophie Ellis Baxter blowtorching her Christmas cards. There's a lot to take in. But one thing is clear. When you look across all the adverts, we're confused about the meaning of Christmas.

For Sainsbury's and Morrisons and Liddle and Waitrose, it's all about the food. Christmas is about the food. The Waitrose strap line.

When the food's good, everything's good. For John Lewis, well, it's a bit trickier to understand what's going on there. It seems to me the Christmas advert with John Lewis is if you plant a grow-your-own-Christmas-tree seed that grows into a Venus flytrap that terrorizes the family so that it has to be pulled out into the garden.

But you then bring your present out into the garden and the Venus flytrap menacingly eats those presents and then spits them out unwrapped, you'll have a wonderful Christmas. Then the strap line.

Let your traditions grow. I don't know about you, but Venus flytraps have nothing to do with tradition around Christmas in my house. What about Marks and Spencers?

[2 : 21] What's the essence of Christmas for Marks and Spencers? Well, here it is. You do you. Here's their message.

Quote, This Christmas, do only what you love. The messages are mixed. But I think that reflects a confusion that we all have at some level when it comes to this time of year.

What is the point of Christmas? Is it tradition? Is it the food? Is it all about you? Or something else? We know there's something about a baby in a manger in there somewhere, but we don't really know.

So what invariably happens is the season rolls around every year and we go through the motions. Sometimes it's great. Sometimes it's grim. But we get to January and we're not really sure why we went to all the trouble.

Well, this evening I want to go back to the first Christmas to try and do something to clear some of this confusion. So if we can turn back to those accounts from Luke chapter 2, page 7.

[3 : 33] First of all, we'll go there. I want to make three observations about what we're told here. And these observations will clarify what Christmas is all about, really. And not only will they do that, but they will show us how if we can grasp the real meaning of Christmas, Christmas actually has the power to transform your whole life.

Christmas has the power to charge every day of your life with meaning and hope and joy. So here's the first observation to note. Christmas is real.

Christmas is real. Did you see in that first reading from Luke chapter 2 how Luke records times and places and everyday details? Verse 1, And in those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone went to his own town to register. Mary and Joseph are responding to state bureaucracy.

They're registering in a census. And it's a specific census. Luke would have us know it was the first one under Quirinius. Luke is saying, listen, check the public record office. Then verse 7, The inn where the baby was born.

[4 : 50] There was an inn. It's a real place. It had a postcode. We're going to go to verse 8. On page 9, the shepherds, what are they doing? They're shepherding. They're doing what shepherds do. It's become common to say that the Bible stories are myths.

But this doesn't read like a myth. It's all too ordinary to be a myth. C.S. Lewis says this, I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends and myths all my life.

I know none of them are like this. Of this text, there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage, either this is recording what actually happened, or else some unknown writer without known predecessors or successors suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern novelistic realistic narrative.

End quote. What Lewis is saying is, this is historical record. If you were to read chapter 1 of Luke's gospel, he says that himself. He says he is writing an eyewitness account of the things that happened. These are real people in real places.

Now, that's one of the problems that we have with the Christmas adverts, isn't it? Because we know that they aren't real. They are sentimental and lovely and feel good. But we know that Graham Norton isn't going to turn up at our house with some waitrose food and a big smile on his face.

[6 : 09] And what's more, we know that if he did, it wouldn't change our lives one bit. If Christmas is just tradition for its own sake, then we're wasting our time.

We're wasting our time. All the good wishes are empty because they're based on nothing. But the birth of Jesus has the power to change your life because these things actually happened in history. First thing to see is Christmas is real. Here's the second observation. Turn over the page to page 9. Christmas is scary. It's scary.

You think to yourself, what could be scary about Christmas? Apart from perhaps some of these Christmas jumpers I see around, they're pretty frightening. Look at verse 8.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

[7 : 12] Shepherds, we need to understand this, shepherds spend their whole lives outside. They sleep on the hills. They go toe-to-toe with wild animals in order to protect their flock. Look, they're out there all times, all seasons.

They are hardy men. They're tough. They're not easily scared. But what we see in verse 9, what they see in verse 9 is, is terrifying to them. And why is that? Well, it's obvious, isn't it?

It's obvious. They see an angel. You've been to the nativity. The sheep, the wings. Angels are terrifying, right? No, what? Do they really?

Have a look. Look again at verse 9. They are terrified because they saw the glory of the Lord. That is, they glimpse the one who stands at the center of the universe.

The one who stands at the very heart of reality. Can you imagine what that would be like? Do you ever come across something that simply stops you in your tracks?

[8 : 11] A landscape so vast that it takes your breath away. A moment of athletic brilliance that leaves you just, oh, open-mouthed when you see it.

Hearing a piece of music so beautiful or reading a poem so moving that the experience actually changes you. Why do you feel that way? Why do you feel that way?

Could it be because the world is enchanted? It is more than mere time and matter, motion and chance. Could it be that there is a reality that is greater than you and is higher than the sky?

What we see here is that it is that deeper reality that the shepherds saw. They saw the source of all the grandeur and all the beauty in the universe. They saw the glory of the Lord.

One of the biggest mistakes I think we can make at this time of year is that we sentimentalize Christmas. There is nothing sentimental about the one who stands behind this world of beauty and

meaning and love.

[9 : 16] No wonder the shepherds were terrified. When we see brilliance, whether it's physical performance or remarkable intellect or something like that, it's intimidating to us.

When we witness brilliance or we get close in some way to brilliance, we feel our inadequacy and we want to withdraw. We want to shrink back. That is exactly what happens here with the shepherds.

Now, it's not because they saw their inadequacy besides someone who was physically or intellectually better than them, but because they are confronted with the perfection of a holy God. See, the reason for their fear is moral. In the presence of divine glory, they see themselves as they truly are, as sinful men before a holy God.

In fact, that is why we all keep God at a distance. We keep God at a distance because we're flawed and we know that we're flawed. We know that we don't work as we should.

[10 : 20] We're not right in ourselves. We're sinful. And we don't want to be exposed. So we avoid Him. Sometimes we avoid Him with high-sounding philosophy.

Usually, though, we avoid Him with reasons that amount to us being able to do what we want to do. Now, that's a problem. But it's that problem that Christmas has come to deal with.

That problem is precisely why we need Christmas. See, you hear the word sin, and you think, well, that sounds like an obscure religious word. I don't like the sound of that.

It doesn't resonate with me. But sin is simply self-government. That's a very brief definition of sin, self-government. It is living life on our terms in God's world.

And let's be honest, there's nothing obscure in our experience about that. We know it very well. We know it because we see it in the mirror. Living life on our terms in God's world. In fact, it's that desire in all of us that the Marks and Spencers advert is appealing to.

[11 : 25] No more lofty source than the Daily Mail said this about the M&S; advert. Quote, M&S; appears to be encouraging shoppers to do what they want this Christmas.

Using a starry lineup, the M&S; missive for 2023 is to put yourself and your own needs first. That is the definition of sin. M&S; have identified the root of all of our problems in the world.

But rather than giving us a solution, they want us to lean in. They actually want us to embrace the very reason why we are scared in the presence of God. I want to suggest to you that there is a better option.

And here we need to make our third observation. See, by the end of the story, verse 17, can you see? The shepherds have moved on from their fear. They've moved on from talking about angels or the glory of the Lord.

They are talking instead about, you see, this child who has been born. Why does this child eclipse this incredible and terrifying moment?

[12 : 31] Well, it's because in the end, our third observation, Christmas is good. It's real, it's scary, and it's good. We have rejected God and His world, and He comes into this world at Christmas.

Surely we're going to be in trouble if that's the case. But listen to the angel, verse 10. The angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Isn't that remarkable? The people who fear... He comes and he says, To people who fear being exposed. The Christmas message is do not fear.

How is this possible? Well, the good news and the great joy is because, verse 11, Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord.

This baby, swaddled in the manger, is the long-promised Savior. The one that those Old Testament passages that were read for us earlier in the service was pointing to. He is the Christ, the promised one.

[13 : 35] He is the Lord. He is God Himself. In the greatest love this world has ever known, Coming to our world in all of its brokenness, to put it right.

Christmas is good because it tells us that God has come to fix His world. But more than that, He has come to fix us. To forgive us for the way that we've treated Him, And the way that we've treated others.

He came to wipe the slate clean and to save us from the selfish M&S; vision of life. The last thing we need is more selfishness at Christmas.

Rather, we need to see that Christmas is the very thing that deals with our selfishness. Because it is about the birth of a Savior. Jesus was born at Christmas on a rescue mission.

I turned 50 this year, and a few months ago, some old friends arranged a weekend, and we went away. And we did something called coasteering, which 20-something years ago was great fun and very easy.

[14 : 40] We had a lot of fun doing it. Not so much now. One of my friends, when we were up on the coast in Northern Ireland, he was leading the way, and he said, Right, you jump in here, and the waves will wash you up here, and you just get out on the rocks here.

And I went, Cool, no problem. And I jumped in here, but the waves didn't bring me here. They sucked me under and drew me out. I was in trouble.

I was very scared until, out of nowhere, one of the boys appeared, and he pulled me to the side, and we climbed out somewhere else. And I'm here to tell the tale.

I was in need. I was scared. And he rescued me. I can tell you that brought me great joy. That was good news, seeing him pulling me over.

Good news of great joy. This is what Christmas is about on a grand scale for your life. The one in the manger has come, and he's come to live in order to live the life that we should have lived but didn't, die the death that we deserved on the cross on Good Friday, and rise again to save any and all who will trust in him.

[15 : 49] Did you see that verse 10? The Savior is good news of great joy. Do you see who it's for? All the people. No one who comes is refused entry. Whoever you are, wherever you're from, whatever stories your past could tell, those things that you are scared to bring to God, if you turn to him, and you can do it now in your seat, if you turn to him, he will forgive you at all, and he'll welcome you.

Victor Hugo said, So the question is, can you see the goodness?

Can you see that for yourself? Well, here's the test. If you believe that Christmas is real, and if you know that you're keeping God at a distance, if you do not see the coming of Christ as good news of great joy, you haven't really grasped what's going on.

If you're not thinking, wow, this is good news of great joy, you haven't grasped it. And I want to say, if that's you, I want to invite you to come back in January to explore further.

We're running a thing called Hope Explored. These flyers are on the seats. Bring your questions. That's what this is for. It's three nights on the 10th, 17th, and the 24th.

[17 : 19] The date's wrong, the 24th. Three Wednesday evenings. Bring your questions. Don't stop this year at tradition, or food, or even yourself. Get to grips with the Christ at the heart of Christmas, because, because, he really is the only one whose love can transform not only your Christmas season, but your whole life.

Thank you.