

Watchnight Service

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[0 : 00] And so the BBC, they've done a poll on the best Christmas movies in Britain. Die Hard came second, sadly. That wonderful story, It's a Wonderful Life, came on the top of the pops.

And very often, the thing that makes a Christmas movie is that in it we see the struggle, a very real story. And then in that story, there's a message that we're meant to take away and understand. And something that we are to think of, something that is meant to be a treasure that we think about the rest of the year coming. So you think of It's a Wonderful Life.

The message there is that even though sometimes good things aren't recognized, they are still good things to do because they look after other people.

And very often, these messages are messages from God. Or from a messenger, a supernatural messenger. So we think of the ghosts in the Christmas carol.

[1 : 04] And I wonder if you were sitting here tonight and you could speak to God. What is it that you'd want Him to say to you? What do you think the message that He would tell you is?

What would be top of the list? And our reading tonight is very much like a Christmas story. It's not made up. It's a true story. Actual events, you can go look them up outside of the Bible.

But the circumstances of it are very much like a Christmas movie. We have a joyful, ordinary circumstance. A birth.

It sounds exciting. Or a marriage. And then there's an issue. An unexpected birth. And then in the middle of that comes this amazing message from God.

Directly from God. That we are meant to understand and think about. And so our reading starts back with a flashback to the birth of Jesus.

[2 : 01] So if you've got your sheet there, you could pick it up there. And just look down at verse 18. There should be a little 18 there. And it goes, this is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about.

His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. They'd made promises to be married. And although this is the start of the story of Matthew, we have this tantalizing breadcrumb over what's going to come.

Right in the start of the story there. I wonder if you spotted it. Maybe if you've been to church, you've probably spotted it before. Look how he introduces Jesus in that very first section.

He calls him Jesus the Messiah. Sometimes we say Jesus Christ. And Christ, Messiah are the same word. And it simply means God's king forever.

So straight away we know how the story is going to turn out. And we get this little clue that you might get. If you say when you re-watch a movie, you spot little clues at the start of the movie that play out later.

[3 : 08] Well, back in our story, no sooner do we hear the good news of this announced engagement. And engagements are brilliant. And we're getting our champagne out. And we're excited for a Christmas wedding.

Snow coming down and the bride looking spectacular. Then we get a but. And I haven't been a vicar for very long. I haven't worked for a church for very long.

But I know that when you go to a wedding and there is a but, that's never a good thing. That's always going to be slightly dangerous turf that you are.

And here there is quite a big one. So just look at the end of verse 18. But before they came together, she, that's Mary, was found to be pregnant.

Our lovers are very much in love and they come together and straight away there's a big issue. And it's not a small thing. It's not something you can sweep away.

[4 : 09] Mary is pregnant. You don't need the wonders of modern medicine to spot that Mary is pregnant. It was very obvious that she was pregnant.

She had a big bump. It was quite clear. And Mary couldn't hide it from Joseph. But look at how she became pregnant there. By the Holy Spirit.

Mary is engaged and she is pregnant. How might our lovers have felt at that situation?

How do you think Joseph might have felt? It would have been good news to get engaged, but she's pregnant through the supernatural means.

Well, we don't get much of Mary's reaction, but we do get Joseph's reaction. So just look down at verse 19. And so her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man, not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly, but after he had considered these things.

[5 : 18] It's probably worth noting where it says divorce there. Marriages in those days, engagements were a lot more formal in those days than they are for us in the West here.

We take marriages and engagements quite lightly. But there, it was a really big thing. If you make a promise to marry someone, it's a big thing. It's as if you are married.

And the author, Matthew, he brilliantly tells the story. So straight away we get how Joseph is a righteous man. He does good things. He thinks carefully. He always is careful to do the right thing. And he wants to obey the law. And then we get a feeling of how the struggle he's going through there. He's righteous, but he doesn't want to hurt Mary.

So he decides, maybe I should do this. And then he considered it, and he thought about it. And so Matthew brilliantly gets you into Joseph's heart and his feelings that he was going through there.

[6 : 21] I could do this. I could do that. I don't know what to do. What should I do? I wonder if you've seen that movie, Notting Hill. Notting Hill's a romance.

And Hugh Grant, before he got older, he had foppish hair falling all over the place. He was the quintessential English gentleman. And he falls for the American movie star. And straight away, they fall in love, and there's a butt.

Her husband comes back. And the movie cuts back to Hugh Grant. And you see his wondering, What should I do? I don't know what to do. And he speaks to his family, his weird and wonderful family.

And that's a bit like this scene here. And I wonder if you've ever been in a situation like that.

You've felt the struggle there. It's a very true to life story. Maybe you've been in a romance and you've felt that story. You feel invested in the story.

[7 : 22] So Joseph decides on a course of action. And what does he do? He goes to sleep. And it's here that we expect the magic of Christmas to happen.

And it's here after this decision was made, in the small hours of the night, when Joseph is fast asleep, that he gets a message from God.

And it's a very spectacular message. It's an angel of the Lord, an angel of God. God speaks to Joseph. And that angel is simply a fancy word there.

For someone who comes as a messenger to God. And he speaks to Joseph. So verse 20 continues. An angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife.

Because what has been conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit. And so in case you missed it the first time, where the narrator has told you that Mary's pregnant by the Holy Spirit, he tells you again, this baby is from God.

[8 : 33] His mother is earthly, Mary, but he is filled and created by the Holy, or not created, but he is conceived by the Holy Spirit, begat, if you want to say.

And so there's a supernatural message that Joseph gets. And to his credit, what does he do? Look down at verse 24.

When Joseph got up from sleeping, he did as the Lord's angel had commanded him, and he married her. But he did not know her intimately until she gave birth to a son, and her name was Jesus.

And it's a very real Christmas story, isn't it? Our hero, Joseph here, he gets a supernatural message from God that tells him the message of Christmas, the thing that he's meant to treasure and go away from and ponder and think about over the next coming years.

And what is the message in this story? What is the thing that Joseph has had to consider and think about?

[9 : 48] What is the thing that made him resolved, I'm going to marry Mary, despite the hardships here, despite the problem that seems so self-evident here, so obvious?

Well, just look down at verse 20 again. Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived of her is from the Holy Spirit.

She hasn't behaved badly. This is a good thing from God. And she'll give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

And then the narrator, in verse 22 and 23, he gives us a comment, and it's like when you're watching a movie and suddenly the narrator speaks, and you know this is an important thing that you should be listening to.

So look what the narrator says. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God's with us.

[10 : 59] And so what is the message in the story? What is the message that Joseph treasured, that he had to pay attention to? Well, it couldn't be clearer, really.

It's absolutely clear. Matthew doesn't want you to miss it for anything. It's simply that Jesus, Jesus who's born at Christmas, that we celebrate every year, is God come as a baby.

He's fully God and fully man. And why has he come? Well, to save his people from their sins. That's Jesus is God, come as a baby, fully God and fully man, to save his people from their sins.

He is God with us. He's God our Savior. That was promised a long, long time ago, and that he has come to save us from our sins.

And sins is just a Bible word for all those things that you do wrong, where you say no to God, where you say, I won't listen to you. And that shows itself by how you treat your friends and treat your family when you're horrible to them and you don't give them the nice presents that they might deserve or other little ways like that.

[12 : 17] Maybe in small ways, maybe in big ways. It's a bad attitude to God and to others. And at Christmas, we remember how God came into the world as our Savior, Jesus, to save us from those things.

Those things when we've said no to God, when we've treated people badly, where we have let ourselves down, when we've let our parents down, when we have let our friends down.

And that's the message of Christmas. And it's a message of great joy. Because if you know you've got things wrong and you've let others down, it's a good thing to hear that those things have been forgiven and that you can be right with God forever.

But I wonder if you've got a Christmas movie, a favorite Christmas movie, that you may be going to go rush home and watch tomorrow. I wonder if you'll remember the message of that Christmas movie.

We know they're good messages. We hear the message, love your family, life's more than money, remember to do good things, even though it seems hard.

[13 : 30] But will we let those messages change us? Will we remember them onto Boxing Day and onto New Year's? And likewise, I wonder, as we've heard the message tonight of Christmas, that Jesus is God come as a baby, fully God and fully man, to save us from our sins.

I wonder if that's a message that will let change us in the year to come. I wonder if that's something that we'll think about over the coming weeks and wonder about and maybe scratch the surface a bit more of.

Well, one way that we can do that, scratch the surface a bit more, is we can come back to church in the new year on our Back to Church Sunday on the 9th of July or you could speak to someone after the service, find out a bit more about this message.

And so, in this little story here, we have a picture of someone who hears the message from God and is changed.

And look what they do. They hear the message, verse 20 and 21. They understand it. Joseph understands it, verse 23 and 24. And then he takes it to heart and he obeys it and he acts in accordance with it.

[14 : 54] So, as we close, I wonder if we might look to Joseph as to how we'll respond to this Christmas message. Will we act on it? Will we change according to it?

Will we try to do the right thing? We might be trying to do the right thing now but try even harder and hear this message that Jesus has forgiven us despite all the things that we might have got wrong

previously.

And that he wants to know us and that he loves us. And at Christmas, he shows us that. Not coming as a stern headmaster but coming as a baby to woo us and bring us to him.

God with us. Emmanuel. Let me close in prayer as we finish. So, Father, we thank you for the message of Christmas. That Jesus has come as God as a baby.

Fully God and fully man. and that he came to forgive us of our sins. Lord, we'll have to wait to Easter to figure out what that looks like exactly.

[16:01] That he forgives us by loving us so dearly that he died in our place. Please help us to wonder about these things. Please help us to think about these things in the year to come.

Please help us to long to hear this message. Please help us to look to Joseph and how he responded as someone who is righteous and faithful to the law.

Please help us to carry these things onto Boxing Day, onto New Year's Eve and even further into the new year. In Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, we're going to have a break. We're going to have a break.