

Carols by Candlelight

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[0 : 00] Thank you, Ruth, for reading that for us. I don't know what you guys are hoping for for Christmas. Sir Oliver Franks was the British ambassador to the US, so he's based in Washington, D.C.

And one December, he got a phone call from a local radio station asking him what he would like for Christmas. And he thought it was very kind of them to get in touch and offer him a gift.

But he didn't want to sound greedy or over the top, so he suggested something modest and easy, nothing flashy. And then you can only imagine what he thought when he listened to the radio on Christmas Eve and he heard the following statement read out.

We've done some research of our own about what different representatives of other nations would most like for Christmas. The Russian ambassador says that for Christmas he wants peace on earth. The French ambassador wants friendship between the nations. The German ambassador wants a great upsurge in international trade, ensuring growth and prosperity for all. And the British ambassador wants a box of crystallized fruit.

[1 : 05] So Oliver Franks there, he was asked what he wanted for Christmas and it turned out he'd set his sights amazingly too low. But let me ask you, what are you wishing for for Christmas?

Maybe there's a present you've got in mind, maybe you've bought it yourself. My seven-year-old daughter was quite underwhelmed with me last week when she saw that the present that I wanted, that I'd already bought and it had arrived in the post. But it's the best way to ensure that you're not disappointed.

Maybe for you guys it's not about what you get as a gift, but of course there's so much more to Christmas, isn't there? There's the family, the friendships, there's the break from work as well. But whatever it is you're dreaming of this Christmas, this account from Matthew who knew Jesus personally to be an eyewitness, it confirms for us that really all of us are setting our sights too low. We're going to just look back at that reading that we've just had. And Joseph is a guy we can all relate to. He is a friend of anyone in 21st century Scotland, Joseph, because he's not gullible at all. Well, this news shatters his worldview in the same way that it would smash our worldview. And so he doesn't know everything that the modern obstetrician knows about pregnancy, but he knows full well that in the ordinary course of events, for Mary to be pregnant, she must have been unfaithful to him.

[2 : 24] It takes the visit of an angel for him to be persuaded not to break off the engagement. And he is persuaded that no matter how extraordinary it might seem, there really is a God who made us, who was stepping into our world.

And the absolute key for us to grasp the breathtaking significance of that first Christmas comes in the two names that are given to that baby. The first one we're going to think about is Emmanuel. So my first point of two, Emmanuel, God comes to meet us. That came in verse 22. The verses are just the little numbers by the sentences there. So the third paragraph, let me read from it again. Matthew tells us 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 with us. God had spoken through this messenger, Isaiah, 700 years earlier, explaining that through a child born to a virgin, God would dwell with his people.

[3 : 31] Jesus was that man. On that first Christmas, God, the creator of everything, the cosmos, the one who can hold the galaxies in his hands like dust, he has come into the world to be with his people.

And Jesus demonstrated that he was God throughout his life. In fact, it's extraordinary, isn't it? Sometimes one of the barriers for us to believe in who Jesus is, is that he was so extraordinary.

And yet he was doing that to demonstrate who he was. Just think, what would you expect to see in a man who is God? Would you expect great wisdom? God giving us answers to the big questions of life.

Well, that's what we see. He taught as nobody has ever taught before. It's remarkable when you think about it, this unschooled carpenter spoke words so profound that still today millions of people hang on his every word.

What else would you expect to see of a man who is God? Great character, perhaps? God showing us by example the best way to live? Well, again, that's what we see.

[4 : 42] We see Jesus live a life of unparalleled humility. He never puts a foot wrong. Extraordinary beauty to his life. He loved as nobody has ever loved before.

Young, old, rich, poor, powerful, marginalized. He loved everyone. He had courage, integrity, wisdom, compassion. And what else would we expect of a man who is God?

Great power, perhaps? Perhaps God showing us how powerful he is. Surely we'd expect that. And again, that's exactly what we see. He didn't just love people.

He had the power to put things right for people. Around him, the blind could see, the deaf could hear, even the dead were raised. In Jesus, God has come to meet us.

And it means that every one of us can know God personally for ourselves. Just to try to get into this and make it real. Could you just imagine, please, for me, that it's Christmas morning.

[5 : 45] And I don't know what that looks like for you, but imagine it's Christmas morning and you go into the room that you normally go into to open your presents. But instead of who would normally be there, like maybe friends or family, whoever it would be, it's just you and God.

And you're going to give a gift to God, because it's Christmas, and he's going to give a gift to you.

And God says, let me go first. And you're thinking, what is God going to give me?

He could give me anything. He owns everything. What's he got for me? And you take off the wrapping, and this is the gift. God's gift to you is himself, Emmanuel.

And that is the greatest Christmas gift we could ever have. Because he made us for that gift. He made us to know him. This God, the true God, who is generous and giving and kind and good and just.

So Christianity is not about rules. It's not even about carols, actually, even though we like them. It's about knowing the God who made you. And that relationship is the only way to enjoy life to the full.

[7 : 00] It's how we're most satisfied, by building our lives on him. And if you think about it, that's a real reversal in our thinking about Christianity. You know, if you're on the outside, looking in at the Christian faith, it's tempting to think, well, I couldn't go near that, because I just want to live out my own desires.

I've got all these desires to live out. The writer C.S. Lewis wrote about this. He said, look, it's not that God finds our desires too strong. It's that he finds them too weak.

Actually, we're half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and money and holidays, when all the while, something far greater is on offer for us.

Knowing God. There was an early Christian, Augustine, who wrote a prayer to God. It said, you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. And the news of Christmas is that that rest is on offer to all of us, no matter who we've been, now that Jesus has come into the world.

God's gift to us is himself. So that's our first name, Emmanuel. God comes to meet us. Our second name is Jesus.

[8 : 10] God comes to save us. Just have a look with me again at what the angel says to Joseph. It's in that second paragraph. The angel says, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. Jesus means God saves, and he was given that name because he'll save his people from their sins.

I don't know what you feel that you need saving from. There might be something in your life just now that you are aware of, and you don't want it to be the case, but you can't control it, whether it's sickness or sadness.

For our world, 2017 has been like so many other years. There have been some really good things this year, and yet there have also been lots of extremely difficult things in the world.

Perhaps we'd say the world needs saving from some things. We've had the horrors of the Grenfell Tower fire this year. There was the terrorist attack on Manchester Arena.

[9 : 25] Teenagers at their first ever concert killed. There are millions of people displaced, looking for shelter from humanitarian tragedy in Syria and in Myanmar as well.

And these problems in the world, they are signs for us that if there is a good God, something has gone terribly wrong in our world. And Jesus explains to us that the core problem is that in our hearts, we have not let God rule.

We've pushed him away. And that's what sin is. Sin is living for ourselves instead of God, building our life on something else, even if it's a good thing, but it's not God.

And all of us are guilty of that. And it's created this great chasm between us and a good God because of our sin and his goodness that stands in opposition to that sin.

So that if we go on ignoring God, he will give us what we want and we'll be left without him forever.

So just imagine again that it's Christmas morning and you're there in that room with God and you've opened your present from God and as you unwrapped it, it was the gift of himself.

[10 : 39] And Jesus, the Son of God, is there in the room with you. And he says, shall I show you what I'm getting God the Father for Christmas?

And he gets out his gift and he opens it to show you and it is pure, brilliant goodness. It's wonderful. And it's called righteousness.

It's Jesus' perfect life. He loved God perfectly. He loved everyone perfectly. And Jesus lived that life as an offering to his heavenly Father, as a gift. It's just what God the Father wanted from him and from all of us.

And Jesus has done it. And then he turns to you and he says, what are you going to give God the Father? That's the key question. Jesus gives his perfect goodness.

What are we going to give to God? And this is where we have a real problem because so many people around us think that what we personally could offer to God would be enough for him to be pleased.

[11 : 45] Oh, well, you know, I've never murdered anyone. I'm not perfect, but, you know, I don't tell lies. I'm not a mugger. I don't go to church, but, you know, I'm not too bad.

Maybe my good deeds will outweigh my bad deeds and God will be okay with it. And we've got to get real about ourselves that that's not enough for God. Just last week, we tried something that we've not done for a while, which is that in sending out our Christmas cards as a family, this year we've done a little Christmas newsletter.

I don't know whether you've seen those. Some people do them and send them out. Other people can't stand them. But anyway, we've done one this year. And so we've got little bits of news about each member of the family and what we've done this year.

But of course, it's all kind of good things. Just imagine if I did a newsletter like that, but I wrote on it the five worst things that I've thought or said or done this year.

There's just no way I would send that to anybody. And it's the same for all of us, if we're being honest. But God sees all of that. So it's as though we're standing in the room on Christmas morning, looking to offer something to God and he's waiting for a present from us.

[12 : 57] And instead of a present, we're just holding a bag of rubbish and all the bin juice is kind of leaking out on the floor. So what happens next? Well, if we understand what happens next, our Christmas explodes into life.

It's that Jesus looks at what we've got in our hands and he says to us, I can see that you are completely unprepared to stand before my heavenly father. But listen, I'll tell you what we'll do. I've got this perfect goodness that I'm going to give to him. Why don't you let me write your name on that gift as well and we'll say it's from both of us.

And that rubbish that you've brought in, let me take that away and I'll deal with it. And 33 years later, his life is drained out of him on the cross as he pays to deal with that mess, to deal with all the ways that we've lived wrongly, dying in our place for it.

That's how he can get the name Jesus because he saves his people from their sins. He lives the life we should have lived for us and he dies the death we should have died in our place to pay for everything we've done wrong.

[14 : 14] Just imagine what that means when you accept it. It's an offer of a completely fresh start for your life. An offer that puts you right with God an offer that means that it no longer matters what

anybody thinks of you anymore because God, who made you, approves of you thanks to a free gift from Jesus.

This is the real Christmas. An offer to you of a gift from our maker that is so precious and so undeserved and so wonderful it would transform your life to accept it.

It's transformed my life. So please take a fresh look at Jesus this Christmas. Inside your booklets as you came in this evening as well as the service sheets we put in a couple of things.

One was a booklet about Christmas, the Christmas message just to take away and have a read.

And then there was a flyer in there as well. On one side we're inviting you to come back to St. Silas on a Sunday in early January just to come and see us on a normal Sunday.

Not so different from tonight. We don't like the candles but we're still here and we're saying come and see. Come and hear about a fresh start as we hit the new year. We'd love to see you on the 7th.

[15 : 29] On the other side we've got details of a course we're running starting on the 14th of January called Christianity Explored. A chance to hear more about the Christian faith either for the first time or as a refresher if you want to go over the basics again.

It's just a way to follow this up. Please think this Christmas about what we've sung about and what we've heard about this evening. The true meaning of Christmas found in those two names.

Emmanuel God has come to meet us and the name Jesus God has come to save us.

We're going to sing again. Our final song is an absolute belt. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.