

Luke 1:1-20 // Ruler, Rescue, Response

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[0:00] Well, if we've not met, I'm Martin, the lead pastor here, and let me say on behalf of everyone, thanks to the choir. Don't they sound absolutely brilliant?! And thank you for your patience, those who were stood at the back. I know it's standing room only this evening.

I love Christmas. I'm sure lots of you love Christmas. We just heard that Joe loves Christmas as well. Presumably like this guy who painted the sign that I saw recently.

I don't know whether you saw this. Someone clearly very excited about Christmas. But there can be confusion about Christmas as well. And it can feel at times, for some of us, like there are lots of things we feel obliged to do at Christmas time.

We feel obliged to write cards and send them. We feel obliged to get gifts for people who already have what they need. We feel obliged to meet up with certain family members who we don't normally fit into the diary.

We feel obliged on Christmas Day to eat much more food than we would normally eat. And maybe we feel obliged to watch more TV than we normally would, to wear paper crowns.

[1:07] Maybe we feel obliged to play charades or another game that's tradition in how we do Christmas. So that by the end of it, we can find ourselves washing up and thinking, you know, we've thrown a great party, but we're not totally sure why.

But Luke unwraps for us what we're celebrating as he records for us the words of the angel, God's messenger, to those shepherds, that Christmas is good news of great joy for all the people.

Now that's astonishing if you think about it. On the 19th of November, just under a month ago, the roof nearly came off at Hampden Park as Scotland secured a place at next year's World Cup.

It was certainly good news of great joy, but there were Danish fans in the stadium as well. You know, for them, it was actually a really bad night. It was not great.

The Christmas news, though, we're being told, is good news of great joy for all people, whoever we are. So for a few minutes, we're going to see what that good news is with the three R's of Christmas.

[2:12] And the first R is a ruler. Christmas is about a ruler. Look with me again at verse 10. It's in the sheets, but I'll read it for us. The angel says in verse 10, Today in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you.

He is the Messiah, the Lord. Now that word Messiah is a title, a title for God's long-promised forever king.

Luke starts his account by telling us about a different king because he wants us to know that this is rooted in real history. He tells us about the Roman emperor, Caesar, and how he ordered a census and everyone does what he says.

He is the one with the political muscle at that time. But Luke wants us to turn our gaze away from that political power to somewhere that looks very insignificant, to an ordinary man, Joseph, on his way to an ordinary town, Bethlehem.

And three times Luke tells us why. He says it's the town of David. David had been God's chosen king for his people a thousand years earlier. And God made an amazing promise to David, that king, that one day in his royal line would come God's Messiah, God's forever king.

[3:31] So Christmas puts the Caesars of our world, the emperors, in their place. So often our eyes turn to visible power and strength. One of the words of the year this year was brologarchy.

I don't know if you came across that. It's the term being used to describe the small group of fantastically wealthy tech guys who own the big tech giants. And they seem to sort of have become kind of friends in a very competitive kind of way.

And they've got power and the world gives them lots of attention. But Christmas says to us, put your real attention on this baby. Over the centuries, God had made great promises through prophets about what he will do through this forever king.

That he'll mend broken hearts. That he'll fix broken relationships. That he'll restore broken lives. And the angel is saying to the shepherds and to us, finally, the wait is over.

The king is here. Good news. Great joy. And then when you look at the adult life of Jesus, you see that he really was the one who can make good on those great promises of God.

[4 : 45] You might know C.S. Lewis's novel, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It tells the story of a fantasy land, Narnia, which is in darkness under evil power.

And the mark of that is that in Narnia, it's always winter and it's never Christmas. But the land has a hero, a rightful king, that its longing will return and put things right.

And when Aslan the lion, the hero, arrives, what happens is the snow starts to melt. The first signs of spring start to appear.

And people start to see that and they say, Aslan is on the move and hope returns to Narnia. Well, when you read Luke's gospel account of Jesus' life, you find that's what it was like around Jesus. Around him, blind people received sight. Lame people could walk. Even the dead were raised. And you can see God's promised king is on the move.

[5 : 46] He started fixing things in the way God had said would happen. He's mending broken hearts. He's restoring broken relationships. He's fixing broken lives.

He can do it. And it's a foretaste of what Jesus will do in the future. He's going to come back and he's going to put our world right. And this is good news for us because when we look around the world, what do we see?

Do we not see loads of things that we know that we just cannot fix? In the world news where there's ongoing conflict and there's escalating tension.

And in our own lives when we come to Christmas and so often there is difficulty for so many of us. There might be grief. There's someone missing. There's an empty chair or things that we're worried about.

Broken relationships. Broken hearts. Broken lives. Well, the angel is saying to us, put your hope in Jesus because he is the one who can fix it.

[6 : 46] And he will fix it. There was a new story earlier this year about people here in Scotland who missed a royal visit. I don't know if you saw that. The Princess Royal, Princess Anne, went to the Royal Highland Show here in Scotland.

And she was touring the cattle stalls. So it was a rare honor for people to meet royalty. And this picture got taken. Two farmers who slept right through it, completely oblivious.

But if you don't mind me putting it like this, it was only Princess Anne. Whatever you think of the constitutional monarchy of our country, whether or not you would regret missing them or happily sleep through their visit, Christmas is telling us here of a completely different kind of royal visit to our world.

One we cannot choose to ignore. God's firm plan that he's declared to our world is that he'll put it right through a forever ruler. And he's now been born.

That's our first R, a ruler. But when the angel appears, the shepherds do not immediately celebrate. We read that the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified.

[8 : 01] Literally, they were filled with mega fear, filled with great fear. Why? Well, of course, they're afraid because they've witnessed something supernatural. And that's a frightening thing.

But there's more to it here. The glory of God is the brilliance of God. It's who God is and what he's like on display, emanating out from him. So when the shepherds are surrounded by the glory of God, the reason they're terrified is not just that God's power is visible to them, but his goodness, his purity is tangible for them in his presence.

And that brings us face to face with true goodness. Again and again in human history, when people have an encounter with the real God, the God who is there, they are terrified.

Because confronted with pure goodness, it exposes what we're really like, that we fall short, that we're messed up. And that brings us to our second R for Christmas.

It's rescue. The angel tells us that this baby is the Messiah, the Lord. But the other thing he says about the Messiah is, today in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you, a rescuer.

[9 : 18] It might sound strange to you and me that the idea that we need a rescuer, when we think of rescue, we think of mountain rescue, or the Coast Guard, or soldiers on a rescue mission to get someone back.

And we might think, well, what do I need saving from? But we get a clue as to why we might need a saviour when the other angels arrive on the scene. Luke tells us in verse 13, he says, Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.

Now if you picture that scene, in one of our carols we've just sung, we actually sung about it, what we sung about was a choir of angels. But when you look at what Luke actually tells us, it wasn't a choir.

He says, It was a company of the heavenly host. And the word host means army. This is a company of the armies of heaven.

If Jesus is God's rightful forever ruler, and a man of pure goodness and justice, and this is his army, that's a daunting prospect for us, even a terrifying prospect, until we hear the angels say, On earth, peace to those on whom God's favour rests.

[10 : 43] The offer of peace from an army implies to us that you and I are at war with God. It probably doesn't feel like that.

You go about your life, you go to work, you watch TV, you spend time with your friends, and all the time you're not so aware of a great conflict between you and the living God. But we mustn't be mistaken.

Every one of us in our hearts has declared independence from God. We've pushed him out to the sidelines of our lives. We've said in our hearts to God, I don't want you to wear the crown in my life. I want to wear my own crown. Do things my way. And that attitude plays out in our relationships with those around us. It's why we see around us broken relationships, and broken hearts, and broken lives.

When the Times newspaper, some years ago, asked the question of some prominent novelists and writers, what's wrong with the world today? They got a letter in from the writer G.K. Chesterton that said, Dear Sirs, I am.

[11 : 52] He had the self-awareness to see that the heart of God, the problems in the world today, are the problems in our own hearts. None of us are the people we ought to be.

And if God is going to establish his perfect kingdom through this ruler, and he lets us in as we are, we'll spoil it. But through these angelic messengers, God is not declaring the beginning of a war. He's declaring its end. An invitation from God to you and to me, not to make things up to him. Rather, to receive a gift of peace from him.

How will that rescue happen? Well, the angel says, this will be a sign to you. You'll find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger. And we might think, well, the baby in the manger, you know, they just go together at Christmas.

You know, like turkey and stuffing, and pigs and blankets. It's just a kind of Christmas thing, baby in a manger. But really, this is astonishing. It's horrifying. This expectant mum has arrived in a town, and no one will make room for her and her baby.

[13 : 02] There's no room for this king, God's forever ruler. And this reveals the pattern for his life. His birth makes him look excluded, and weak, and unimpressive.

And he starts life like that, in a wooden feeding trough, and he ends his life, strung up on a wooden cross. And he looks excluded, and weak, and unimpressive as he dies.

But that is God's power, to rescue us. The only way that God could make this peace offering to us, and still be a just God, still demonstrate that he is just, was for Jesus to come, and die in our place. Dying the death, we should have died. As though when he died, a great funnel was placed above him, and all the wrong things that we've ever done, the ways we've mistreated God, and pushed him away, were placed on him.

And he dealt with them, once and for all, at the cross. So that he can now offer us peace, a just peace. And when you accept that rescue, you go forward in life, with the security of knowing, that you must be loved by God, very deeply indeed.

[14 : 15] As we heard Joe describe, about the peace in her life, I wonder if you've thought before, how precious you must be to God, that he wouldn't spare his own son, but would send him, on such a costly rescue mission, that you could be offered peace with him.

And it means you can know God personally. And that's the very reason we're on this planet, to live life in a right relationship, with the God who is there, the God who made us.

And it's the only thing that will give us true peace, in our hearts. When Luke was writing this, lots of people in the Roman Empire, looked to Caesar, to give them peace.

He had the political power, and they put their hope in him. But remarkably, not long after Luke wrote this, his gospel, the Roman philosopher Epictetus said this, it's on the screen, he said, while the emperor may give peace from war, on land and sea, he is unable to give peace, from passion, grief, and envy.

He cannot give peace of heart, for which man yearns, more than even for outward peace. Well, isn't that extraordinary? 2,000 years on, are we any different to that?

[15:27] We find that our hearts are restless, they're longing for peace. It's what we're looking for everywhere. And we try and find peace, through achievement, through financial security, through family, through approval, always moving on to the next thing, to fill the hole.

And the peace your heart was made for, and yearns for, comes from receiving Jesus, as your savior, so that you know the security, of his love, and approval, and you take hold of the gift, of knowing the living God.

We've had two of our three R's, a ruler, a rescue, thirdly and more briefly, is our response. A response. Luke focuses, on how different people respond, to the news from the angel, so that each of us is moved, to consider, well, how am I going to respond?

The shepherds respond, with eagerness. Did you remember, did you notice that? They said to each other, let's go to Bethlehem, and see this thing, that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

And I would love to urge you tonight, to be eager, in the coming days, to take a fresh look, at Jesus. In your gift packs, tonight, which will open later, there's an invitation, to come back to church, in January, to eagerly explore with us, who Jesus is.

[16:51] And then Luke tells us, about another response, is the response of Mary. He says, Mary treasured up, all these things, and pondered them, in her heart. Well again, would you be willing, to take the time, to reflect, this year, to ponder, and think, how will you respond, to God's gift to you, of a rescuer?

One of the media sensations, this year will be remembered for, was Netflix's series, Adolescence. And the John Lewis, Christmas advert this year, picks up on it. In the advert, a teenage son, is in his family home, wearing headphones, and it's evident, there's no conversation going on, between him and his dad.

There's something going on, in the relationship. They don't know, how to speak to each other, anymore. And then his dad, spots a gift, under the tree, that he wasn't expecting. And he picks it up, and looks at it, and it's from his son.

And he opens it, and it's a vinyl record, and it's a song, that he loves. And he puts it on, and it takes him, right back, to when he was a young adult. It's a song he loves.

It's the perfect gift. And the boy, is looking on, from the hallway, to see his dad, open the gift. And his dad's, treasuring the gift. But crucially, the advert, can't end like that.

[18:07] What we need, is to see, how is the dad, going to respond? And he does respond. The dad turns to his son, and he moves towards him, and they embrace. The relationship, is restored.

And the slogan, comes up, if you can't find the words, find the gift. So this Christmas, John Lewis says, is about the gift, that restores, a relationship.

Well, we've heard tonight, something has gone wrong, in our relationship, with the living God. And that Christmas, is the wonderful news, that God in love, is holding out to you, the perfect gift.

It's up to each of us, how we will respond, to that, personally. But God is inviting, you and me, to turn back to him, to have our relationship, with him restored.

And through that, to find the peace, that we were made for.