

Carols by Candlelight

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[0 : 0 0] Great, well, good evening, everyone. My name is Martin Ayers. I'm the minister here at St. Silas, and it's great to have you with us, whether you're a regular here or you're here for the first time ever.

It's great that you could come to join us for our carols by candlelight. I don't know whether for some people the carol service is part of your Christmas tradition, or maybe tonight you're thinking of adding it as a new one.

Christmas traditions develop all the time, and there are some modern ones. One of the ones that's recently become something of a tradition in the UK is the Christmas adverts and the way different shops vie to get popularity for their different adverts.

This year, John Lewis have got Buster the Boxer, who is fascinated by the trampoline in the back garden. Argos have an army of yetis who are doing their fast-track delivery service.

Our own city gets a mention in Aldi's advert as a carrot, Kevin the carrot, inadvertently flies over Glasgow attached to Santa's sleigh, and even Celtic Football Club are in on the act this year with their own advert.

[1 : 0 9] But it might be that this year the most popular one has come from M&S.; I don't know whether you've seen it. It's the touching story of a six-year-old boy who writes not to Santa but to Mrs. Claus, Santa's wife.

She looks extremely Marks and Spencers in the advert until she gets this letter and then suddenly is like Batman as she heads out on a mission to give the boy's sister a very special present.

So festive adverts are part of the modern Christmas, and Marks and Spencer are experts at it. They ran a campaign a few years ago where they asked different celebrities to describe Christmas in three words.

Christmas in three words. They got a lot of suggestions. Eating too much. Family and friends. Filling a stocking. Last-minute shopping.

And then up came the three words they wanted. Marks and Spencer. I don't know what three words you would use to describe your Christmas. But just thinking about the words that we've heard and we've sung tonight, I've chosen three words that summarize the Christian faith's message about what Christmas is really all about.

[2 : 2 0] They come from Luke's first-century accounts of Jesus' birth that we've had read for us this evening in two installments. And the first word is history. Let me read again the start of Luke's account.

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 up to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. Sometimes people think that the Christmas story is just a myth.

A good myth, but just a myth. An inspiring legend. But that's not what the early Christians thought. You can tell it's not what Luke thinks. Just think about how he started his account there.

[3 : 26] He doesn't say, once upon a time. He doesn't say, a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. No, he says, you remember that year when Caesar Augustus did the first census of the whole Roman world?

That's when all this really happened. This is rooted in a real point in history. And throughout his life, Jesus was seen by real people doing things that only God can do.

Just think about his teaching. He taught as nobody has ever taught before. It's one of the things you've got to weigh up as you make your mind up about who Jesus is, that this unschooled carpenter spoke words so profound that still today millions of people build their lives on his teaching.

And what's even more remarkable than that is that Jesus walked his talk. He lived as nobody has ever lived before. He loved everyone.

Young, old, rich, poor. He loved everyone. He never compromised on love and truth. Even when they put him to death on a cross. And as he was being nailed to the cross, he prayed to God, Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.

[4 : 34] For my money, his life was miraculous. I don't mean just the angels who appeared to announce his birth, but everything about his life, as the people closest to him could never find any fault with him.

He fulfilled hundreds of years of promises, many of them very specifically. And he demonstrated that he had the power to do things that only God can do.

Around him, suddenly, the sick were healed, the blind could see. Even the dead were raised. And so, let me say to you this evening, don't come to Christianity because it's fulfilling, though it is fulfilling.

Don't come to Christianity because it's exciting, though it is exciting to be a Christian. But come because it's true. It's history. That's my first word, history.

But why do we need Christianity to be more than just an inspiring myth? Why does it matter whether or not it's true? Well, that brings me to my second word for Christmas, and it's hope.

[5 : 42] Let me read again from Luke's account. Christmas is light in the darkness.

And the message that the angel brought to the shepherds confirms that for us. Let me just read what the angel said. The angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. Now, that word Christ, it's not a surname. It's not as though if you looked up Jesus in the phone book in the first century, you'd have found him under the letter C, Jesus Christ.

No, it's a title. It was the title for God's promised rescuing king. For hundreds of years, God had sent these messengers, prophets, with a message that one day he would put right all that's wrong in the world through sending a king.

He predicted through these prophets that this rescuing king would be born in the royal line of a particular king, King David, who'd been the ruler in that part of the world centuries before.

[7 : 00] And that this king would be born in Bethlehem, the town of David. And the angel confirms to the shepherds, this is the Christ child. This is the Lord, even.

That word Lord is a word for God. In other words, this is God becoming a man to step into our world to put the world right. This is light in the darkness.

And to appreciate that, we need to be able to accept tonight that there is darkness in our world. Sometimes we're able to ignore it and do our best to make sure that our lives aren't too affected by it.

And then at other times, we get engulfed by the darkness. It might be because of something very personal, getting sick or treated badly or experiencing grief.

But it might be because of the world news. Just think, what will 2016 be remembered for as we look back on this year? Certainly lots of good things.

[8 : 01] But also, the murder of Joe Cox on a British street, the horrors of a truck being driven through crowds on Bastille Day in Nice, more than 4,000 people drowned this year in the Mediterranean Sea trying to reach Europe from Libya and other desperate situations.

or the news this week that's affected so many of us about Aleppo of humanity in meltdown, civilian families shot dead in their own homes, people trapped there who can't get away.

We get engulfed by the darkness. And the truth is that we'll get over those specifics. We will get over them. But what we find over time in our world is that there's a principle about darkness.

In the Lord of the Rings, there's a line about darkness, like this. It says this, about the shadow, which it means evil. Always after defeat and a respite, the shadow takes another shape and grows again.

Well, that's just about Middle Earth, but it's true of our world, isn't it? Always after a defeat and a respite, the shadow takes another shape and it grows again. Evil springs up.

[9 : 14] It causes carnage to people. It gets sorted out. We sort it out. We move on, but then the darkness takes another shape again in our world. And that's why humanity doesn't just need an inspiring story to make us better people.

We need to hear of a real God who really cares and who is going to act to put the world right. And the message of Christmas is the God that we need is the God that we have.

That's why the angel can say to the shepherds, don't fear. I bring you good news of great joy. Don't fear because of what Christmas is assuring you of.

The reality that there is a good God who is deeply concerned about our wounded world so that one day in the future he is going to put it right and sort it out.

Hope. But there's a problem for us in that news. The problem is that the darkness in our world is not just in Aleppo and Libya and on that dreadful day in Nice.

[10 : 19] It's in our hearts as well. The Russian poet who was a Christian, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, said this, if only there were evil people insidiously committing evil deeds and it were only necessary to separate them off from the rest of us and destroy them.

But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. So if you think about it, why were the shepherds afraid that night? It wasn't that they were afraid because the world is dark and God seemed absent.

No, they were afraid because God was suddenly present. That's what happens when God shows up in human history. The angels represent God and when people throughout history have had a vision of God, they don't go, oh, that's interesting.

Well, that sorts out the kind of question and the debate for me. No, they're terrified when they see God because He is perfect light and we all know deep down that there is darkness in our hearts.

So the first word about Christmas was history. the second word was hope. But the third vital word to us about Christmas is humility. And we see that in Luke's brief summary of Mary's birth and their journey, Mary and Joseph's journey.

[11 : 44] Let me read it for us. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

Clearly, Mary and Joseph were poor. They don't even have the clout or the money to get a guest room on a crucial night for them. The baby is laid in an animal feeding trough.

Now, the problem for us is that we sentimentalize that on Christmas cards and Advent calendars with everyone looking clean and safe and those smiling cows, the cows are smiling as they look at this baby in their food tray.

Mary looks as though she's just been out shopping at Laura Ashley. The truth is, this was a brutal beginning. There's no room for this child. And this birth marks the pattern of what Jesus' life is going to be like.

He doesn't come to a palace or as a general or as a professor. He comes in humility and weakness. He starts his life in a wooden feeding trough and he ends up on a wooden cross.

[12 : 55] He's rejected by an innkeeper and then he's rejected by everyone and killed. He's wrapped in cloths in a stable and later they'll strip him of his clothes and he'll be executed.

And the question we should be asking as we think about that is why? If this is God coming into our world, why the humility? The answer is that if Jesus had come first time to destroy all the sources of evil in the world, there would be none of us left.

We're not the people we know we ought to be. If Jesus had come first time to destroy all the sources of evil in the world, there wouldn't be any of us left. Jesus says, there's a darkness in your heart that's too great for you to fix yourself.

And that's why he came to be rejected. It's because it was the only way to rescue us. That he would die in our place.

When he died, he dealt with the darkness. He took it on himself so that we wouldn't have to. That's why the angel doesn't just announce Jesus as king to the shepherds.

[14 : 08] He also says, today in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. Jesus is described as good news, good news of great joy, joy for all the people.

And that's because he's for people who are not religious, people who are not from Christian homes, people who have really messed up in life, people who've rejected him for years, anybody who will accept it.

And the good news is that he is a saviour. Jesus didn't come to bring judgment on us, he came to bear judgment for us. I wonder if you've ever thought before how precious you must be to God, that he would give up his own son so that you could be forgiven and come to know him.

So that's the real meaning of Christmas. God breaks into our world to die for us because he loves us. And I would love to ask you, how will you respond to that this Christmas?

Christmas is history, it really happened. Christmas is hope, it's light in the darkness, news of a God who cares and who will act to put the world right.

[15 : 23] And Christmas is humility. God came to die for us so that we can turn back to him. And I guess there'll be a range of different responses to that news this evening.

Some of you will think, I don't believe a word of it. Well, if that's you, thanks for listening, I hope you come back. Others of you will already be committed Christians and I hope that this Christmas you have the opportunity to reflect on that.

And it brings you the joy that the angels promised it would bring to all people who accept the message. But others of you might be thinking, it's time for me to think more about this.

In the new year here at St. Silas, we're running a terrific new course over seven sessions on Sunday evenings. It's called Life Explored. It's a chance for you to explore what life's all about, what we're really living for, and to look at who Jesus was and why he came, to ask any question you want, to examine the evidence and hear the full story.

We meet at half six, finish at eight, you get food, there's a DVD, a chance to discuss it. I'd love to urge you to join us in the new year on Sunday the 15th of January.

[16 : 42] Come to the first one and just see if it would be helpful for you as you think more about what Jesus has to offer. Thanks for listening.

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