

The greatest gift

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[0 : 00] So as I've mentioned a few times already, it is that time of year again. We've got two weeks before. That's exciting for the kids.

It's exciting for us. But what it also means is for us as parents, as adults, we need to have everything done in two weeks.

And I know that for many of us, there'll be lots going on in the next two weeks. There'll be work parties. There'll be family dues. I don't know, perhaps it seems like for the kids, they've got something on every single night of the week.

And it's a busy time. Most people, I don't know about you, you'll have your tree up by now. And everyone has, don't they, around Christmas, their family traditions. And we talk about the spirit of Christmas.

I don't know what that is for you. So there's lots of things that people like to do around Christmas, isn't there? Traditions. Maybe it's sat around the TV, you get your favourite Christmas movie on.

[1 : 04] When I was younger, we used to watch Home Alone. We've watched that already. We used to watch Home Alone or Miracle on 34th Street. Everyone round the fire on. Or maybe the Christmas for you is, you're excited about the food, the turkey, the pigs in blankets.

Or maybe it's something else. It's just that sense of people coming together, being kind to one another. Whatever Christmas is for you, I want us to think this morning about what Christmas is really about.

Why do we do this every year? When it comes to Christianity, most people know that Christmas has something to do with a man called Jesus.

A man called Jesus who was born and who lived 2,000 years ago. But what does that all mean? And why is it significant? Why is it relevant? Why is God's Word relevant to us today on the 10th of December, 2023?

The relevance, the real relevance to our lives, it comes from a verse that we read out in our first reading. In one of the verses, it tells us everything that we need to know about Christmas.

[2 : 14] One of the most famous verses in the whole Bible comes from John chapter 3. There is so much packed into that one sentence.

So much. That we don't, this morning, even in the short time that we have, we don't have time to say everything. Or think about everything that is in that verse. And so there is just a few things that I want us to notice.

And we'll take a few things one at a time. The first thing that I want us to notice in that sentence is that it says that God loved the world. He so loved the world.

British culture and culture around the whole world is obsessed with what it means to love. Isn't it? You look at the most well-known, successful songs over the last 50, 60 years.

They're all about love. What it is. Where to find it. How to keep it. The way that it makes you feel. And how we all feel differently. If you look, the Beatles, all you need is love.

[3 : 27] Madness, it must be love, love, love. Elvis Presley can't help falling in love. Stevie Wonder, I just called to say I love you. And if you were to ask on the street, what is love?

You'd get a thousand different answers. Is it a feeling in here? Is it something you do? But here we read today that God so loved the world. What we're reading here is that there is a being, a person, a living God who created you and created the world that you live in.

And that he loves you and he loves the world he created. That's what we're reading here. The issue we have with love is that we have all these romanticised Hollywood ideas of what it looks like, what it feels like.

But perhaps the truest way to see, to know what love is, is not by what someone says or by how you feel, but what you do with that feeling. Anyone can say the words, I love you. Anyone can sing a song about love or have that sort of those feelings inside. How do you know that someone loves you? To know that someone loves you, there would have to be a degree of proof. [4 : 40] And if you think about that, that's true in all aspects of life. What you say about yourself, you prove with what you do. You prove it by action.

For us to really know, for us to really know that God loves the world. He would have to do something for us to see that he loves the world. I tell my kids I love them every day, but my words would mean nothing if I didn't provide for them, didn't listen to them, wasn't kind. If I fed myself but left them hungry. If I didn't clothe them and took them in to bed at night. You would say, if you knew that that was what I was like as a parent, you would say, He's a bad parent, he doesn't love his kids.

God's actions show that he loves the world. How does he do that? Well, let's go back to the sentence, the verse that we were reading.

The thing we're going to see, For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. There's two things to notice here. Firstly, he gave something.

[5 : 43] But secondly, he gave something that he only had one of. I don't know what the most precious thing you own is. The most precious thing you have. Maybe it's something material.

An expensive piece of jewellery or something else. Or perhaps, perhaps, it's something less tangible. It is for most people. It can be a hard thing to measure out of everything in life.

The most precious thing is the thing that you can't imagine losing or being without. That is the most precious thing that we have. That would cut you deep if it was taken away.

For most of us, we wouldn't say something material, would we? It would be something much more precious than that. It would be, perhaps, our family or our friends. People that we have a cross relationship with.

When relationships break down, there is loss. There's loss. And the reality is for each one of us is that at some point in life, we will lose somebody close to us.

[6 : 46] Not through choice. And it will be devastating. It will be devastating. Whoever, whenever that happens, we would give anything, anything to have them back.

And here we read, here we read, that God gives, he gives his only son, who he has the closest relationship with.

God loved the world so much. How do we know that? The proof of that is he gave his only son. That is the proof, the evidence of his love. To quote madness, it must be love, love, love.

Let's head back to our sentence again. And this is probably the most important aspect, is why did he do that? You look again at that verse. We read it to the end of that sentence.

Why did God so love the world and give his only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life? If the reason he gives up his only son, the real reason is to bring about a change.

[7 : 51] And you see what the change is? The change comes to those who believe in him, who put their trust in him. It changes their destination, those who believe in his name.

Whenever most of us go anywhere these days, I don't know about you, but we have to, most of us will have to use sat-nav to reach our destination to get where we're going. I'm sure that's true for most of us.

I'm also old enough to remember the days when sat-nav first came in before we could use Google Maps. When it first came in, you remember the first machines?

You had a TomTom. It needed updating once a week. And the issue was that every time you upgraded it, the road layout changed.

And if you didn't do that, you could type in the destination and you'd end up going completely out off course. The wrong road. And you'd see on the news, some poor old fella, he's gone down a country lane, ended up at a dead end and he's totally lost.

[8 : 50] That's where the TomTom took him. The issue there is the belief that you're heading in the right direction, but actually the fact that you're not is taking you the wrong way.

And you see what we read here about belief. You see what we read here about belief. That those who believe in his name, in the name of Jesus, they get a new destination.

Their old destination is that they would perish. Their new destination is eternal life. When something perishes, we throw it away.

You know that after Christmas Day, there's always leftover food. Now, it's alright on Boxing Day. But by the 28th, the 29th, if it's still in your fridge, I don't know, maybe I'll get some funny looks. But you ever do the sniff test? You sort of have a look in the fridge. Can I get, can this pig in blanket, does it really pass? Can I still eat this? Smells alright, have a look.

[9 : 48] Give it a quick sample. But definitely by the end of the week, by New Year's Eve, it'll be no good. The food will have perished. And you'll need to sling it. We know that our bodies will perish.

We know that. We don't want to think about it. We'll do anything to avoid thinking about physically perishing. But this is the good news of Jesus Christ. Whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

If you believe in Jesus, you will not perish. And the reason that's true is not because of Jesus' birth, but because of his death. Not because of Christmas, but because of Easter.

The end of Jesus' life, not the beginning. Where his life, the destination he was headed. When Jesus would perish, hung on a wooden cross.

When we read that God gives his only son, it's not just a broken relationship. Because God gives him up to die. He gives him up to be separated from the one that he loves.

[10 : 53] And the reason Jesus comes and does that is so that you won't perish. He perishes so that you won't perish. This is what it means that light has come into the world.

The darkness of death, of evil is destroyed. Because Jesus dies. He perishes in your place. He suffers so that you won't. His destination is to die on a cross in your place.

In the verses earlier we read in John chapter 3 verse 19. This is the verdict. Light has come into the world. But people love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

We know the existence of real evil. We've seen it. We've prayed about it. We've seen terrible footage on the news, haven't we? Terrible footage of war. You only have to look in our world to know that evil exists.

Evil deeds done under the cover of darkness. We know that in our own place where we live. We see, I see on the village Facebook pages, how just on a small level, in the darkness of night, that things have been vandalised.

[12 : 00] Things have been done. People hide in the dark what they don't want to be found. And the truth is that there are things in our life that we all hide in the dark.

That we wouldn't want anybody to know. The beauty of the gospel. The beauty, the staggering beauty of Christmas. The Christian message is that Jesus comes to offer you life instead of perishing.

And it is sent, he is sent as the gift. He is the gift of Christmas. And he comes free of charge, giving the free offer of forgiveness. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, stands in the dock for all the things we've done.

We fast forward to Easter, to Good Friday, and he perishes so that we don't have to. This is the good news. That anyone who believes in him will receive eternal life.

And it's free. It is free. There's no conditions attached. There's no small print. It is freely offered to all who put their trust in him. It is good news to celebrate, to give thanks for, to remember, to rejoice over as we lead up to Christmas Day.

[13 : 09] I want you to imagine Christmas Day. The kids come running out of their bedrooms. They're straight into their presents. They open it.

They're so excited. They open it and they look at it and they've got everything that they want to. They're delighted. And then they turn to you and they say, Mom, Dad, how much do I owe you? You say, no, no, no, no, no, no. Don't be silly. It's a present. It's a gift. I've given you. No, no, no. Tell me honestly. How much do I owe you?

You see that the ridiculous nature of that happening would never happen. But sometimes we think that the offer of Christmas is a bit like that.

That God wants us. We need to do something in order to gain his love. God offers us the gift of eternal life. Freely. It is the gift of Christmas.

[14 : 07] He offers his son. You don't owe him anything. There's no conditions. Every gift this Christmas is a reminder that what Jesus offers each one of us is free to all those.

Whoever would believe in his name. No perishing. Eternal life given freely. Let's pray.

Almighty God, we thank you so much for the free gift of eternal life that you offer each one of us who believes and puts their trust in you.

Lord, we thank you that it is a free gift. That there's no conditions attached. That there's no small print that if we would believe in you. We thank you that that offer goes out to every single person. That it's not an exclusive conditional offer. But it's for anyone. That you don't show favoritism. But you offer it freely. And so bless us.

[15 : 05] Help us. To remember that this Christmas. And to know the grace that comes from knowing you. That you call us your children. You adopt us into your family. And that we have a forever future with you.

We ask for this in the name of Christ. Amen.