

Carol Service

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening, everybody.

And let me echo Donald's warm welcome to you all. Let me just say, firstly, an enormous thank you to everyone who's managed to put this on. Doesn't this place look cracking this evening?

Lovely fairy lights and the candles everywhere. My question I want to ask you, just as we begin our time together, just as we begin to look a little bit at this passage that was just read for us, my question is, what makes up the perfect Christmas for you?

I wonder how you might answer that. Why don't you talk to someone afterwards? Maybe this is your very first Christmas and you just want to find out. Let me tell you, I'll give you my answer to it so far. First, I'd come to a carol service like this and a beautiful church like this.

So we've ticked off one thing. Secondly, I'd watch the Muppet Christmas Carol. I'd probably watch it multiple times as well, I think. So watch the Muppet Christmas Carol. Then when it comes to Christmas Day, Christmas Day has to start with a big old fry up.

[1 : 1 1] That's most important. That means then you don't have any space to eat until about five o'clock. And then at Christmas dinner, I want roasted Brussels sprouts. If you've struggled with Brussels sprouts all your lives, roast them.

You'll be welcomed into a new world. There's so many things when you think about what makes up the perfect Christmas. I wonder if I ask you, what was your favourite ever Christmas?

And I wouldn't be surprised if lots of the perfect things didn't happen at all. And whenever I think about this question, what was my favourite Christmas? It's back in 1997. So maybe my accent might deceive you, but I am a very proud Irishman.

And I was on the west coast of Ireland in 1997. There was this large storm hit the country. Surged throughout the south of Ireland. And on Christmas Eve, all the electricity went out.

So all the TV shows, the movies that we wanted to watch were gone. This was, now it might shock some of you, mobile phones where you could get onto your 4G and check different things.

[2 : 1 6] So all we could do was we had to fumble around for candles, light them, and we were able to sit around a wireless radio. And we were able to hear about all the different things that were happening around the country.

And strangely, that is my favourite ever Christmas memory. And what was so helpful at that time was we had those candles, and it reminded us, before we had them, we were stumbling and fumbling.

We couldn't see where we were going. But the light helped us to see. You see, this is the reality about darkness.

Darkness hides. Darkness conceals, doesn't it? You might have heard before, or you might have seen before, the Washington Post changed its motto about seven or eight years ago.

And it changed its motto to this. Democracy dies in darkness. You see, it was after some elections, after people contesting the validity of different truth claims, Washington Post themselves are saying, we bring light so that the truth can flourish.

[3 : 38] You see, where darkness hides and conceals, light unveils and reveals. Light helps us to see reality, and it helps us to glimpse the truth.

It helps us to stop tripping and fumbling about the place, and to find our way. So, throughout this service, we've been hearing a number of readings.

We heard a couple about the story of Jesus, about the announcements of his coming birth to his mother Mary, and then we heard the story of how he arrived into Bethlehem, and he was born, and the good news that was announced.

But we also just had this reading from the Gospel of John, one of the eyewitness accounts, and this gives us a slightly different way into understanding the significance of Christmas.

What is the real reason for the season? This helps to pull back the curtain and tells us who Jesus truly is and what he has come to do.

[4 : 53] Let me read to you a couple of those lines again. This is verses 4 and 5, the little numbers there, if you've got one of those Bibles in front of you open. It says this, In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Yuri Gagarin, he was the very first human that went into space, and it's reported that when he arrived back, he said these words, I went up into space, and I did not encounter God.

These words from a Soviet cosmonaut were here was definitive proof. There's no such thing as a God. If he's not up there in our short little trip into space, there's no such thing.

But it misses the point, and it shifts away from the way that we truly see and know God, that this passage wants us to help and understand ourselves.

You see, God's not a character to be seen, but he's the author who oversees it all. And wonderfully, what we see in this passage, what we learn about in the life of Jesus, is he enters into the story.

[6 : 23] He enters into history. He enters into reality. You see, here's the shocking good news of Christmas. We don't have to go up into the stars to find God.

He came down as a young baby, born to a young lass in a nowhere town, and this is how God has made himself known.

It says there that the light shines in the darkness. Jesus is that light, and that light there, that's in the present tense. This isn't a once, 2,000 years ago, Jesus shone.

This is a light that's continuing to shine into the darkness. And darkness, throughout this account of Jesus' life, in John, darkness is representative of deceit and death.

But light is symbolic and points us towards truth and life. Now, I don't think I need to probably convince anyone here of the danger of darkness.

[7 : 47] Think of all the disinformation we see, whether that's in the news, whether that's on the internet. the way that truth is distorted and twisted to benefit the powerful and the influential.

But what we see here is through the weakness of a baby, born to a young woman, Jesus is the light because he reveals the truth in the darkness.

A little bit later, let me read to you, it says this at the very end, no one has ever seen God, but the one and only son who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father has made him known.

You see, God is the light who reveals the truth because Jesus is the Son of God.

Let me explain it to you this way. Earlier this year, we had our second baby and just maybe a few weeks after he was born, he was struggling to feed, he was getting kind of agitated, we were downstairs in the living room and my older son jumped up on the couch, patted him on the back and said, take a deep breath.

[9 : 30] That moment, I realized I'd probably said that to him too many times when he was getting anxious and different things. But you see there, you've got a glimpse into seeing something that my son sees about me as his father that many other people don't see about him.

And what we see here, what John is trying to tell us is that Jesus is the Son who is in the closest relationship with the Father.

And literally, it says he's in the bosom of the Father. That means about the kind of relational closeness between Jesus, the Son of God, and God, the Father.

And because of his closeness with him, Jesus can tell us truly who the Father is. He's the one that can tell us the true story, the authorized story of who God is and what his plans are for the world.

But secondly, we know this, and it's wonderful, is verse 14. It says this, the words became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

[10 : 54] You see, Jesus, who is in the Son of God in perfect, closest relationship with God the Father, has entered into the world and we can know him because he has been here with us.

That's the wonderful thing when we read these eyewitness accounts of Jesus, we can see what God is really like. We can see what the light, what life, what truth really is.

And it's wonderful because it shocks you. Jesus is the one who goes into temples and throws over tables when he sees corruption. He's the one who reaches out to those who are outcasts and forgotten and downtrodden.

Jesus is the one who laid down his life, who died on a cross. You see, the truth of the world shocks us because it comes to us at Christmas.

We remember it came to us as a baby. It came to us as one who was rejected. Light has shone in the darkness.

[12 : 16] Just that story about Yuri Gagarin we heard, the Soviet cosmonaut. He was the one who said, I went into space and did not encounter God or at least that's what it's alleged because in years since, those who knew him well have said that actually even in an officially atheist communist state he was still a very religious man who went to church because you see he knew what we've seen so we don't have to go into the stars to find God but we can encounter him in his son and we can know him through his words.

in this prologue to the gospel of John we see some people reject him just like those who lived at the same time as Gagarin.

Some people really disliked him. Why? Because he challenged the darkness. Some people like to live in the darkness.

You know that feeling don't you in the morning when the light is turned on and it's too bright and you try to close your eyes and you bring your cover over your head.

Too many people when they encounter Jesus that's the way it was. Some people rejected him but others received him received the light and the promise of those who receive him is they receive life.

[13 : 55] Now I hope I don't burst any bubbles just as we finish but we don't actually know when Jesus was born. December 25th December probably wasn't the date but I think it's really appropriate isn't it to celebrate Christmas at this time of year.

we're coming to the darkest time of the year. Those of you who have lived up here in the northeast know what darkness is. Some of you have probably forgotten what light is at this stage.

Hope you've been taking your supplements of this and indeed. But isn't it really appropriate at this time we celebrate Christmas because in the deep darkness we celebrate the light that has come.

And we'll go back to that line that we started with. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

You see those who rejected Jesus sought to snuff out the light. And the wonderful thing if you read from the beginning to the end and it's not long but I encourage you to do is the light that sought to be snuffed out was raised up and the light continues to shine.

[15:18] That's what we celebrate. That's what we remember. That's what we sing of. And it's the invitation for all that the light can shine in our darkness.

Let us continue to sing as we remember that. We're going to sing Hark the herald angels sing. And there's a lovely line in the second verse.

I hope it's got the right verse there. But it says this, Hail the heaven-born prince of peace. Hail the son of righteousness. Light and life in ought to all he brings risen with healing in his wings.

So when we get to that verse, why don't we give it loudly tonight. Let's let's let's let's let's
let's let's let's let's let's let's let's let's let's let's let's