

Christmas Carol Service

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[0 : 00] It's one sleep till Christmas. Now, how exciting is that?

Who's excited tonight? How many excited people do we have? Come on, lift your hand up if you're excited. We've got a few people who are excited. Well, for all of you, whether you're excited or not, I have a wee question.

Do you do Christmas cards? I don't. It's not a point of principle. I just can't be bothered if I'm being perfectly honest. So I'm not one to send Christmas cards.

But this year, I found in the house, I think it was my wife really who found in the house, Martha found in the house, a pack of cards, an unopened pack of cards.

And half of them were Christmas cards and half of them were New Year cards. You know, you get these packs and there's six of one design and six of the other. Well, in this case, six were Christmas cards and six were New Year cards.

[1 : 01] And the New Year cards bore the message, Happy 2015. So my conclusion was that five years ago, I must have thought about sending Christmas cards and never got around to it.

But whether that's the explanation or not, I'm not altogether sure. I did wonder about using those Happy 2015 cards this year because I thought that might be a bit of fun.

But I resisted on the basis of my principle of not sending cards. Now, I should say a big thank you to those of you very kindly who have sent us cards.

We are grateful and we do appreciate them even if we don't reciprocate. But we did get a few odd cards this year. And I want to show you three cards that we got this year that are a little bit different. So the first one I've got here is this rather fetching gold one, Merry Christmas. And then inside it says, I'll just read what it says, Happy Christmas, best wishes from all at Cults Academy.

[2 : 04] And there's a happy face there. Now, for the benefit of those who maybe don't know where we live, we live opposite Cults Academy. So I guess we're neighbors of the Academy. But as far as I can recall, this is the first time in the ten years we've lived there that we've had a Christmas card from all at Cults Academy.

So I was somewhat intrigued. Now, I was wondering, well, why is this? And the only conclusion I could come to was that they so miss our boys who were pupils at Cults Academy. They were such exemplary pupils, so charming, so good in their homework and their exams that even to this day the staff miss the Macpherson boys.

And so they sent us a Christmas card, which I thought was rather nice of them. Best wishes from all at Cults Academy. Well, that's one. The next one I've got here is rather intriguing. And it says on the front, ho, ho, ho.

And then it says, Merry Christmas and all the very best for 2020 from your milkman. Now, I bet you there's not many here have gotten a Christmas card from your milkman, because I imagine most of you don't have a milkman.

Well, we, as of two weeks ago, have a milkman. It's a shame, really, because in two weeks' time we're going to tell them we don't want them to be our milkman anymore. But it seems a bit harsh.

[3 : 19] But anyway, he sent us a Christmas card, which I thought was rather charming of our milkman. And I've never met the milkman, but I'm sure he's a very nice man. So we got this second card.

But I have another one. And this really is the special one of the three. Because this card, wait for it, but this card is from Santa. Yes, I'm glad some people are excited by that.

This card is from Santa. And I'll just read some of what it says. There's really quite a lot inside.

There's quite a message from Santa. I'm not going to read it all, but I will read some of it. And one of the first lines it says, I've just received your lovely letter.

So that's Santa writing. And he says, I've just received your lovely letter. Now, I've got to be honest here. I have no recollection of having sent a letter to Santa.

But nonetheless, this card has come, and it claims to have received a letter, at least from our household. And Santa was very pleased to have received the letter.

[4 : 19] Well, he goes on and says a whole bunch of stuff that I will actually come back to. But he finishes on this rather friendly note. He says, Merry Christmas from me, Mrs. Claus, the cheeky elves, Rudolph, and all the other reindeer.

So this really takes pride of place in our card collection this year. One from the man himself, from Santa. I wonder if God sends Christmas cards.

And if he did, what would the message be in the Christmas cards that he sends? If God did send a Christmas card, I think it would probably be to serve as a prod or a reminder.

With a message along these lines. Don't forget to open the gift I sent you. So the card really would simply serve to prod us and to remind us that there's something way more important.

And that is a present, a gift that he has given to us that we are to receive and open and enjoy. But what gift?

[5 : 23] What is God's gift to us at Christmas? The Apostle Paul, who wrote many of the letters that we find in the New Testament to the churches, the nascent churches there in the first century.

He speaks about God's Christmas gift in a letter that he wrote to a church in a place called Corinth. And in a burst of praise and vibrant enthusiasm, he cries out with these words, Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.

If you want to look that up perhaps later, you can find that in the second letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians in chapter 9. Right at the end of the chapter. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. And I want us to spend a few moments reflecting on God's Christmas gift to you and me. Pondering on what is involved in unwrapping the gift, in marveling at the gift, in describing the gift, and in giving thanks for the gift.

First of all, we want to unwrap the gift. And really, we want to ask the question and answer the question, What is the gift that Paul gives thanks to God for? What do we discover as we unwrap this gift?

[6 : 41] What or who is God's great gift to his people? It's an important question with a wonderful answer. And the answer is Jesus.

Jesus is God's gift to us. Jesus is God's generous gift to you and me. In the words of that very well-known verse in the Bible, in John's Gospel, for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but enjoy eternal life.

We might wonder as we think about Paul speaking of and enthusing in this reality of God's indescribable gift, we might wonder if what he has in mind is the gift of salvation provided in and through the work of Jesus, rather than Jesus himself.

And really, it's of little consequence which of the two options we select. Because ultimately, either way, our admiring gaze is directed to Jesus.

Paul's language, the same Apostle Paul, in another letter that he wrote to Christians in Rome, certainly suggests that Paul viewed Jesus himself as God's great gift, who in turn opens the floodgates for all God's gracious gifts to his people.

[8 : 13] Paul writes in these terms, He, that is, God, who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, along with Jesus, graciously give us all things?

Jesus, the ultimate gift, but who in turn opens up the floodgates for so many more of God's gifts. So we need to unwrap this gift that God has given us.

But also, there's a very real sense in which it's important for us to marvel at the gift. I don't know if tomorrow you will marvel at the gifts you receive. Some perhaps will, perhaps others not so much. Paul, unusually for the Apostle, is at a loss for words that can do justice to the wonder, the marvel of God's gift. And what does he do when he's at a loss for words?

Well, he makes one up. The word translated indescribable in that verse, Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. That word indescribable is not to be found in any known Greek writing, be it in the New Testament or in any other Greek literature of the period, certainly that is available to us to explore.

[9 : 29] It appears to be the first and only time that the word appears in this explosion of praise. And it would seem that Paul, inspired by the Spirit of God, coins this new word in a noble attempt to

find an adjective worthy of the noun.

Paul is endeavoring to do the impossible, to describe the indescribable, and it can't be done, not fully, not exhaustively. And so he resorts to inventing this word.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. Paul recognizes that Jesus is, in a real sense, indescribable. Now, this is both true and revealing.

Why do I say that it's revealing? Well, because the Bible presents God as indescribable and his ways as inscrutable, beyond finding out, beyond coming to the bottom of them.

Again, listen to Paul as he writes to that same church in Rome, in chapter 11 of that letter. Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out.

[10:44] Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be the glory forever. Amen. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, the God-man, the one who is truly God and truly man, shares that divine characteristic.

He is inscrutable. He is indescribable. We cannot exhaust Jesus. So, we marvel at the gift.

But we also attempt to describe the indescribable. Now, that would seem an impossible task. We've just acknowledged that Jesus is, in a very real sense, indescribable.

He is, after all, God's indescribable gift. But, of course, the point is not that we can know nothing of Jesus, but rather that no description or portrait will ever be exhaustive.

[11:47] We will never know everything. We will never know Jesus exhaustively. Not even eternity will allow us that level or depth of knowledge. But we can, thank God, know Jesus truly and accurately as He is described for us in the Bible.

Let me suggest very briefly three truths that we find in the Bible about Jesus as God's indescribable gift. Let me suggest the first thing is this.

He is the gift that nobody deserves. Now, if you would allow me to return to my card from Santa.

Listen to what Santa says to me in my card, a little bit down in the text.

He says this, Now, again, my contention is that I never wrote that letter.

That's my story, and I'm sticking to it. But according to Santa, I claim that I had been very good this year. And, of course, the implication is that because I've been very good this year, there will be a present for me.

[12:59] I deserve to be rewarded for such good behavior. That's the idea. That's the way it works. You behave well, you get a prize.

You get a present for your good behavior. Indeed, even in one of the carols that we were singing, it struck me just as we were singing the carol.

Christian children all must be mild, obedient, good as He. Well, we ought to be mild, obedient, good as He.

But, of course, we're not. God's gift of His Son is wholly undeserved. There's nothing that we can say, Well, I deserve this gift from God.

In the way that children might imagine they deserve a gift from Santa, whether they do or don't is another matter. You see, we are sinners, every last one of us.

[13:59] What we deserve is judgment and punishment. But what we are given is grace, the undeserved mercy of God in the person of His Son, Jesus, a Savior for sinners like you and me.

So this gift, this indescribable gift of Jesus, is the gift that nobody deserves. But the second thing I want to say is this. He is the gift that keeps on giving. How long will the gifts you get this Christmas last?

A day, a week, a month, maybe a little longer? However, contrast that with Jesus. He is the gift that keeps on giving. He is Emmanuel, God with us, always to forgive and embrace and accompany.

Always there, always able, always willing. The gift that keeps on giving. The gift that nobody deserves. The gift that keeps on giving.

But also, thirdly and finally, He is the gift that satisfies our deepest longings and desires. I hope that you get some great presents this Christmas.

[15:07] But I can guarantee you that even the best of presents is incapable of satisfying your deepest longings and desires. Only God's gift of Jesus is able to do that.

Jesus is the water of life that can satisfy your thirsty soul. Come and drink, drink deep, and drink often. And so, as we turn to the Bible, we have provided for us a measure of description of this

indescribable gift, the person of Jesus.

But the final thing I want us to think about is the matter of giving thanks for the gift. How can we give thanks for God's indescribable gift?

Is it possible? Not in any symmetrical way. Not in a way where our thanksgiving might somehow correspond to the gift. That is not possible. I wonder, can you think of a time when you have been the object of an act of kindness and generosity that has led you to respond, how can I ever thank you?

And sometimes the reality is that we never can. We'll multiply that scenario to the nth degree and you can grasp something of our predicament in this matter of giving thanks for God's indescribable gift, the gift of Jesus.

[16 : 31] But does that mean that we are incapable of giving thanks at all? Well, by no means. God has graciously provided us with the opportunity to express our gratitude.

We give thanks, first of all and fundamentally, by receiving the gift, by putting our trust in Jesus as our Savior, by acknowledging our need of a Savior and recognizing in Jesus one who is altogether suitable to be our Savior.

And so we receive the gift as we trust in Him and as we praise God and thank God for the gift of His Son. But then we can continue to give thanks by living grateful lives in the service of God and of others, reflecting in a small measure the love and generosity that we have been and are the objects of.

So this Christmas, may we join with the Apostle Paul in this praise that he expresses with these words, Thanks be to God.

for his indescribable gift and a very joyful and thankful Christmas to you all. We're going to sing again.