

Christmas Carol Service

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[0 : 0 0] If you were here, and if you have a very good memory, you may recall that last year the Christmas charts figured prominently in my cattle service message.

And last Christmas, topping the charts was Ed Sheeran's Perfect, followed closely by Eminem's River. And if you know anything about the lyrics of those two songs, they provided quite fertile ground for drawing out a gospel message related to Christmas. As I was thinking about this evening, I fleetingly wondered whether I might do the same thing. And then I checked to see what was at the top of the charts. And lad babies, we built this city on sausage rolls, though good for a giggle, didn't really provide me with much inspiration for a Christmas address.

Though I have to say, credit to the guy, all proceeds are going to the Trussell Trust, food banks, one of which operates here in Bon Accord. I thought, well, let's see what's number two, what's number three, maybe there'll be something there I can build something around. Well, the second one, I don't even know who this is from, but Sweet But Psycho. And that really wasn't promising at all, trying to build something around Sweet But Psycho. And then at number three, it's Ariana Grande and Thank You Next. And again, by this stage, I had lost any thought of using this as a theme. So I needed to move on. And what I did was I moved on from Christmas Singles to that other Christmas icon, Christmas Jumpers. And let me just tell you a little bit what my inspiration for this was.

In the course of this week, there seems to have been innumerable trips to ASDA. And on one of those trips, I was heading up to the second level. Those of you who can picture the scene at the ASDA, Garth D, and I was going up the escalator to the second level. And as you reach the top, right in front of you is the clothes section. And right in front of me, as if, you know, by design, there was this piece of clothing. And it had this message emblazoned on it, Dear Santa, I can explain. And as I just, you know, I was heading up the escalator. So I had about time to just sort of process those words. And a little light turned on in my head. Now, I know, I make no claim that it was a bright light. But nonetheless, a light turned on in my head. And the thought that Christmas Jumpers could provide me with inspiration for a Christmas message.

Now, to be completely honest with you, what I saw in ASDA wasn't actually a jumper. It was a pair of pajamas. And for the doubters among you, I've actually, I purchased said pajamas, not on that occasion. I had to think about it. And then the following day on another of the trips, I purchased it. So this is the top. So there you have it. Dear Santa, I can explain. Now, it did come or comes with a rather natty pair of pajama bottoms as well, all for the princely sum of eight pounds. I don't know if there's still any left. If anybody's tempted, I get no cut. But nonetheless, these words on the top, Dear Santa, I can explain, got me thinking a little bit. And we're going to see a few images, not right right now. I'll indicate in due course when we're going to see them, of different Christmas Jumpers that will guide us as we share a message this evening. And there's really three things that I want to cover or make reference to this evening. First of all, I want to talk about our Christmas problem. And our, I include, if I can be so bold, I include all of us gathered here. I hope you don't mind me including you in this. Our Christmas problem. And then we're going to move on and think about God's Christmas present, God's Christmas present or gift. And then we're going to think about your X-mas or Christmas challenge. So that's what we're going to try and cover. And the first thing we want to talk about is our Christmas problem. And actually, we are the problem. Let me just show you one jumper that's a little bit extreme on this front, but I don't know if you can read that. But those of you who, well, I've got a smaller screen than you guys, so you're probably at an advantage. But David Attenborough is there in all his glory. And you have this rather depressing message, we are a plague on the earth. Merry Christmas. And I think the reference is to the human race. Now, I may be and sometimes I'm a grumpy old man, but I would challenge the suggestion that the human race is a plague. So let's rather move on to my original inspiration, which were these words,

[5 : 05] Dear Santa, I can explain. And there is a jumper there. I am not the owner of that jumper, sadly. That one comes off the internet, but it has the same message. Dear Santa, I can explain.

And this jovial jest highlights some real issues about our Christmas problem. And one truth it highlights is that we are not good. We know what lies behind the words there. Dear Santa, I can explain.

A child or an adult wanting to get his presents, but concerned that they haven't been good enough. And so there's an explanation. And that is our Christmas problem. Not just our Christmas problem, but our problem full stop. We are not good. Despite the lyrics of Santa Claus is coming to town, the world is not divided into two camps, the naughty and the nice. And you know the song. He's making a list. He's checking it twice. He's going to find out who's naughty or nice. And the world isn't like that. There's not two groups of people in the world, the good people and the bad people, the naughty people and the nice people. We're all naughty. We're all sinners. We may be nice, but we're nice sinners. We fall short of God's righteous and just demands upon us. And so that jovial jest in a way does highlight that reality. We're not good, but it also highlights that we are good at making excuses. You know, I'm not that bad. Yes, I'm not perfect. Okay, if you want to say I'm a sinner, okay, I'll grant that. But you know, I'm not as bad as lots of people. I do my best. Or it's not my fault that the times that I don't meet the mark. It's not my fault. I was just watching, I was in a couple of days ago, there was a Christmas edition of Judge Rinder. I don't know if you've ever watched that program. But the format of the program is you have this judge and, you know, the people come and lay their case before him and he makes a judgment. And on this occasion, there were two guys, two friends, and one of the friends was suing his pal because he had caused a great deal of damage to his van by spilling a milkshake. So we're not talking, you know, big issues here. And so the guy who was suing his pal said, yes, this is what happened and it's cost me 120 pounds to get industrial cleaners in and he should be paying. And the guy who was accused, as he tried to make his defense, he came up with this rather novel defense. He said, it's not my fault because I was very tired and he knew I was tired and he still bought me a milkshake. So when I fell asleep and spilt the milkshake, it's not my fault.

It's his fault. Well, 10 out of 10 for creativity, but a rather futile attempt to free himself of any responsibility. And, you know, it takes us right back to the garden and our first fathers. That was what they were trying to do, lay the blame on somebody else. You remember the words of Adam to God, the woman that you gave me. She is her fault, it's not my fault. And so we're not good and we make many excuses. Perhaps it's best to admit as in another jumper I saw, I don't have an image of it, but there was another one that played on this same theme and it went along these lines, dear Santa, I can explain dot, dot, dot, dot, nope, I got nothing. As somebody acknowledged that even as they tried to explain, they really couldn't justify falling short. Now, I'm calling all of this a problem, a Christmas problem, but is it really a problem? Well, yes, it is. We are all sinners.

And the Bible teaches us that the wages of sin is death. It is a serious matter. There are consequences for us of our sin. And so this is our Christmas problem. But that leads us on to the second thing I want to talk to you about this evening, and that is God's Christmas present. And there's another image I've got for you now that will kind of direct us a little bit on this one. And so you've got the Holy Family there on this rather fluorescent red jumper. And Mary's on the donkey and she's asking Joseph, are we nearly there yet? Now, of course, this is all made up. But in fairness, it's not that difficult to imagine a heavily pregnant Mary saying something like that as they made that journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, something around a hundred miles. And it must have seemed quite an ordeal for Mary. And as I say, I can quite imagine her expressing herself in words to that effect.

[10 : 19] But how does this seasonal scene of the Holy Family, to describe them as they are sometimes described, identify for us, God's Christmas present? Well, the present, God's present, God's gift, the present's beating heart is astoundingly in the womb of the one seated on the donkey. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son. Or in words that we were thinking about this morning, when the time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, the gift from God, God's Christmas gift was in the womb of the one riding on the donkey. But what has that present, God's present to us, what has that gift got to do with the problem that we just identified? Well, the gift, the present, is the solution to the problem.

So, Jesus was sent to save sinners, to redeem those who were lost and enslaved to sin. And he did this by dealing with sin in two ways. You see, the one born in Bethlehem grew up into a man. And

as a man, he lived a perfect life for us, perfectly obedient in a way that none of us could ever be. But not only did he live a perfect life for us, he died on the cross as a sacrifice for sin, bearing the punishment of our sin and doing so in our place. He paid the wages of sin that we were making reference to just a moment ago.

And so this is a glorious Christmas present that God gives to us, the gift of his own son, a savior for sinners. Which leads me on to the third thing I want to mention this evening, and that is what I've described as our Christmas challenge. Now, some Christmas challenges can be very demanding. I was watching just, I think it was on Friday evening, there was the final of the Christmas Celebrity University Challenge. It had been sent to BBC Five, so I obviously didn't expect a great audience. But there you go, I was watching it. And Reading University were competing with Keeble College from Oxford. I don't know what it is about me, but I was rooting for Reading, you know, the underdogs, or why I should think they should be the underdogs, I don't know. Maybe that's just my own prejudices, but I thought, yeah, it'd be great if Reading could win that. Well, I'll cut to the chase. The final score was the College from Oxford 240, Reading 0. A first in the history of University Challenge. It had never happened before that a team had managed to get no points, no points, to remind us of the Eurovision song contest. Well, that was a challenge that Reading certainly weren't up for, sadly. But what about our Christmas challenge? What about your Christmas challenge? Well, let's see another image of another Christmas jumper that can help us direct our thoughts a little. And the words there, certainly on the screen I'm looking at, are quite small, but perhaps on your screen they're bigger. It says this, and perhaps half of us here will enjoy that this more than others. It says, three wise men, question mark, I haven't found one yet. Well, I don't know if that's your experience or not, but the challenge that I want to suggest in the light of the image there of the wise men, whether there were three or more, who knows, but certainly the wise men. The challenge is not for you to prove your wisdom or your goodness by accumulating enough brownie points to gain favor with God, as if somehow there was a way that you could do enough to somehow gain favor with Him. You see, whatever you do, whatever we do, we will always fall short.

[14:40] Your challenge, rather, is to follow the lead of the wise men. What did the wise men do? Oh, what they did? They sought out Jesus. And then, as it records for us in the biblical narrative, they saw the child and they bowed down and worshiped Him. What a remarkable sight recorded for us there. These grown men, these important, influential, wealthy men, bowing down before a newborn child and worshiping the child. And this is the challenge, the Christmas challenge for us all, to worship the one born in Bethlehem, not only to sing nice carols about Him and prepare, as it were, for Christmas in that way, but to bow down and worship Him. Have you done this? Is this something that you do? Do you worship King Jesus?

Will you worship King Jesus? This is the challenge, and this is the invitation. Well, let me finish, and let me finish with one more jumper inspired by a legendary Christmas movie, Elf. And there you have it. I'm sure you must have watched Elf, maybe multiple times. There's Will Farrell, and he's shouting out, who played, of course, Elf, Santa. I know him. Some of you are already visualizing the scene in the film, and if you haven't seen it, well, there's still time this Christmas to do so. Get the DVD, or that shows how old I am. But anyway, find by some means how you could watch the film. But if you have watched the film, then you can visualize the scene of Elf's boundless excitement and telling the world that he knew Santa there in the big department store in New York or wherever it was, and saying that Santa was coming the following day, and Elf screams out, I know him.

Well, the beauty of Christmas is that it is God's way of bringing sinners like you and me into a personal relationship with himself. Not that we can say, I know Santa, but much more wonderful, amazing, and remarkable that the likes of us can testify that I know God through his Son, Jesus Christ. Is that something that you're able to do? Can you testify as that, in your experience, I know him? Not just I've heard about him, not I have some curiosity concerning him, but I know him. And the gospel is God's way of allowing us, who are far from him, to come to know him, and to enter into a friendship with him through the opening, through the opportunity that has been secured by Jesus and his work on our behalf. And so we have a Christmas problem. All of us fall short.

[18:00] All of us are sinners, but we have this wonderful Christmas present, this present from God of his own Son. And the challenge to us would be that we would respond and bow down in worship to him.

Well, God may help us so to do. Well, let's just bow our heads and pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for the gospel. We thank you for the good news of Christmas. We thank you for your gift of your son, Jesus, to be our Savior. And we do pray that you would be the one who would help us to see him for who he is. And as we do, bow down in worship to him and live our lives as disciples, followers of Jesus, seeking to serve and worship him. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.