

Christmas Carol Service

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[0 : 00] We all love a good carol service, and that seems to cut across different views and beliefs.

The believer, understandably, will enjoy singing the good news concerning the coming of Jesus, but there's something about carols that seems to cut across the whole spectrum of belief and unbelief. It was famously stated or quoted Richard Dawkins speaking about carol service. This was a few years ago, and he acknowledged, and I quote, that he liked singing carols along with everybody else.

Now, you might say, well, that's a bit strange. Why would that be something that somebody of that persuasion regarding the existence or nonexistence of God, why would he enjoy singing carols? Well, I wonder why. I don't know if he actually gave an answer or simply stated that it was something that he enjoyed participating in. That's like a case and thought as to why it might be.

[1 : 20] You might imagine somebody enjoying a carol service, if you could imagine, in some ancient and dramatic cathedral. And the beauty of the architecture is something that one could enjoy regardless of the content of the words being sung.

Of course, the music itself is something that people could enjoy. They could take pleasure in not only listening to the music but participating in the singing, again, almost independently of the views that are held about the words that are being sung.

I wonder if for him, perhaps for others, there's the sense of community that you can have when you're gathered with others, and there's a sense of enthusiasm and together singing.

There's something about that. Maybe in a world where we're increasingly isolated, just gathering together with a group of people to sing together again, almost independently of what's being sung. I'm sure there's something of that in the stadium experience. When folk go to Pittodrie or to other stadiums and join in the singing. Well, there's not much singing at Pittodrie, but you can get the picture of what I'm trying to portray.

[2 : 39] There's something about that that people can enjoy. And I wonder if that is true of a carol service for some. Or could it be, and I'm just asking the question, or could it be the joy?

Could it be that in all of us there is, acknowledged or unacknowledged, a thirst for joy? I think it's something we all have, a longing for joy.

It seems to be hardwired into who we are as human beings, a desire, a longing for joy. Of course, we can evidence that in a sense or confirm that in the way that advertisers play on that longing for joy or happiness.

When I was a lad, and that wasn't yesterday, there was an advert on TV that those of you of my vintage may remember. It may have been recycled subsequently, I'm not sure.

But it carried the tagline, happiness is a cigar called Hamlet. Now, I'm not a smoker, but I confess that I went through a phase many years ago of having the occasional cigar.

[3 : 58] I don't know how that happened, but it did. Oh, I'm sure in total I probably smoked 20 cigars. It wasn't a very extended phase. But among the cigars that I smoked, perhaps to just test the claim, were a couple of Hamlet cigars.

And believe me, having smoked them, I could detect no change in my level of happiness. So it would seem to be a good way of getting people to buy the product, but it doesn't seem to deliver, at least not in my experience.

More recently, BMW made a quite extraordinary claim in one of their adverts. And I quote the tagline of that particular campaign, at BMW, we make joy.

Now, that is quite a preposterous claim. This was the claim. And again, there was a sense that if the consumer, potential consumer could be convinced that the purchase of this vehicle would bring joy to their lives, then it was worth spending what it would cost.

And then coming much nearer to the present, this year, Cadbury's came up with a spectacular Christmas advertising campaign.

[5 : 15] I don't know if any of you saw it. It involved their delivery trucks, and all their delivery trucks came together to create this huge Advent calendar.

On the roofs of the trucks, you had the different pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. And when they all came together and parked in the spot that corresponded to each vehicle, these big lorries, it produced from on high this Advent calendar.

Now, I mention that because the slogan of that particular advertising campaign was hashtag free the joy. You have to have a hashtag now. You didn't need to have a hashtag before.

But now, it's not really, it doesn't work if there's not a hashtag in there. Don't ask me why, but seemingly it's critical. Hashtag free the joy.

Now, in the carols that we've sung this evening, and they haven't been chosen particularly to secure this outcome. They're simply the carols we all are familiar with.

[6 : 20] But in the carols we've sung, a joy figures prominently. O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant. Tidings of comfort and joy.

Joy to the world. And we'll finish in a few moments singing, hark, the herald angels sing. And within the content of that carol, we will also sing the words, joyful all you nations rise.

Join the triumph of the skies. There's this repeated theme that emerges of a joy. And I want us to just pause for a moment and think about the place of joy in the Christmas story.

And I just want you to remember one word of what I say this evening. And that shouldn't be too big an ask. It's one word. It's one three-letter word.

It doesn't take a genius to work out what the word is that I want you to remember. It is, of course, the word joy. However, I am going to cheat a little because I'm going to use each letter of that word to represent one aspect of the Christmas story, and particularly joy as an integral part or element of it.

[7 : 40] So we have a J, we have an O, and we have a Y. You might want to try and guess what each one stands for. The first one is so easy, you get no prizes for working it out.

But J is, of course, for Jesus. Now, when I was thinking a little bit about or just Googling on the Internet joy and seeing what came up in terms of one or two of the examples, especially the Cadbury's advert, I read a little bit of the bump that accompanied this campaign.

And part of it assures us that joy is inside us all. Hence, free the joy. It's in there somewhere, and it just needs to be freed.

And a bar of milk chocolate is just the ticket to free the joy. But this idea that joy is inside us all, and that got me thinking a little bit, but I wonder, is that true?

Is it true that inside all of us there's joy just waiting to be released? I think it is true. I've already made this claim or this suggestion that we all have a thirst for joy.

[8 : 55] We all have a capacity for joy, a desire for joy, a longing for joy. But joy needs a source or a reason.

It needs a reason. There needs to be a reason to rejoice. To rejoice without reason is a strange thing indeed. And what is that reason for joy?

Is it a cigar called Hamlet? Is it a BMW? Is it a bar of Cadbury's dairy milk? The angel who appeared to the shepherds in the last reading that we read a moment ago assured them and assures us that the birth of Jesus is good news of great joy.

Which rather begs the question, why? Why is the birth of Jesus good news of great joy? Well, the angel doesn't leave us puzzling over the answer because he goes on to explain why it is good news of great joy.

And the good news of great joy when the angel spoke on that day was, Today in the town of David a Savior has been born.

[10 : 11] Jesus, born in Bethlehem, came as our Savior. But what does that mean? What does he save us from?

And what does he save us for? Well, again, the angel gives us the answer. He saves us from our sin and the isolation that our sin produces.

But he also saves us for, He saves us for a restored relationship with God. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, became man that he might be that bridge to restore the broken relationship that exists between us and our Maker.

And as that relationship is restored, so we are able to secure and to experience and discover our ultimate and lasting source of joy.

J is for Jesus. But O is for opportunity. If the thirst for joy is universal, as I'm proposing, well, let me also propose that the opportunity to experience deep and lasting joy is also universal.

[11 : 30] Again, what did the angel say? The angel said that the good news of great joy was for all the people, for all the people.

The opportunity is for all, and the opportunity is for now. If Cadbury's urge us to hashtag free the joy, I would urge you to hashtag grasp the joy.

The opportunity is for all. It is good news of great joy for all. And that includes all of us gathered here this evening.

J is for Jesus. The reason for joy. O is for opportunity. That all are granted this opportunity. But then finally, why? Any thoughts of what I'm going to say for why?

It's not that obvious, actually. So if you get it, well done. And you can just congratulate yourself, because I won't know if you've got it, so I can't do it. But why is for you.

[12 : 35] Why is for you. And I'm talking here about the experience of joy. I don't want you to be left admiring or pondering or considering the possibility of joy or reflecting on your aspiration for joy or observing others experiencing joy.

No, here are the challenges for you to know and to experience the joy that the angels spoke of. This good news of great joy for all people.

This experience of joy that is not only available to you, but intended for you. The angel said something very interesting to the shepherds in declaring to them the nature of the good news.

The angel said, A Savior has been born to you. A Savior has been born to you. The angel very well could have said, A Savior has been born to Mary, and that would have been accurate.

But no, the message of the angel was that a Savior has been born to you. And of course, at that point, the angel was addressing the shepherds there in the fields. The angel was saying to the shepherds, The one who has been born is your Savior.

[13 : 51] He's been born for you. Not just for the great and the good. Not just for the religious. Not just for a particular kind or class of people. No, this Savior has been born for you.

And two millennia later, this same word is directed to you. A Savior has been born to you. Jesus was born for you.

He lived for you. He died for you. For sinners such as we all are. And the invitation is for you to experience the joy of a restored relationship with God through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Just one word for you to remember as you head home this evening. Joy. And just ponder on the place of joy in the Christmas story and the invitation that is extended to you to experience the joy that is spoken of and that is possible through the coming of Jesus to be our Savior.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, Father, we do thank you for your love and goodness to us. We thank you that you so loved the world that you gave your only Son, Jesus, to be our Savior.

[15 : 10] We thank you for the manner in which He came into the world for His birth. We thank you for His sinless life. And we thank you for His atoning death in the place of sinners.

We thank you that He is indeed the one who has secured reconciliation between God and man and the call to us and the opportunity granted to us is that we would put our trust in Him and know that restoration of friendship with yourself.

Help us to grasp that invitation that is extended to us and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.