

John 1:1-18

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- [0 : 0 0] It's a busy time, isn't it? Yes, even for those of us who once upon a time try to ignore the major Christian festivals.
- You know, I remember when Christmas, Christmas Day was just an ordinary, another working day for my father in the dockyards of the Clydeside.
- Yet how things have changed. Unless we're in what they call today the emergency services, we all more or less get a day off, and indeed most seem to get up to a couple of weeks off, depending on how Christmas and New Year's Day fit into the calendar of the week.
- In past days, we of the Reformed tradition somehow managed to ignore the likes of Christmas Day and Easter Day.
- After all, these were for those of lesser Christian traditions, if we even considered them as Christian. For us it was enough that Christ was born.
- [1 : 1 6] For us it was enough that he died and rose again for us. And for our salvation. To try and somehow time these amazing events, tie them to some special days or special seasons, was for us virgin on the idolatrous.
- Now I'm not going to pretend that the 25th of December is an accurate celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem.
- The exact day on which the Word became flesh and began his pilgrimage of being flesh and dwelling amongst us. Nor am I going to enter into the centuries-long debate of either a movable Easter or a fixed Easter, depending on which side of the Orthodox line you favour.
- But this I say to you this morning unashamedly. I love the Christmas, the Christian celebration of Christmas.
- And in so doing, I don't feel for a moment that I've somehow succumbed and capitulated to the culture of our godless, secular spending society.
- [2 : 3 7] You know I have strong family and cultural links with the Free Church of Scotland. And I can well remember, in my lifetime, sending Christmas cards to some of my Free Church relatives.
- And I never got a card back from them till New Year. And I got a New Year card. These days, I have to tell you, I believe are long past.
- Now I'm not here this morning to decry the past or the traditions of our people. Not at all. But maybe before saying much more, I do want to say how glad I am to be here.
- Invited back to be amongst you. Because, you know, I often speak of you on other occasions. About your vibrancy as a congregation.
- You are distinctively and distinctly reformed. And as you know, hold to your traditions in public worship of unaccompanied psalms singing, as we've been doing.
- [3 : 4 8] And that today is not the accepted cultural fashion to attract young people. But look at you.

In the main, you, sorry Fergus, you are so young. Excitingly, at the same time, cosmopolitan.

That said, we must face the realities of our day. We are in the very midst of the Christmas extravaganza.

And theologically and ecclesiastically, we are in the period of Advent. But where is Jesus? Where does he fit in?

I came across this story very recently. An atheist was walking through the woods. What majestic trees.

[4 : 52] What amazing rivers. What beautiful animals, he thought. And then quite suddenly, he heard a rustling in the bushes near him.

He looked and only to see a seven foot high grizzly bear charging towards him. He began to run faster and faster.

But inevitably, the bear was closing on him. And in his nervousness, the atheist tripped and fell to the ground. The bear was right there.

Right on top of him. Reaching for him with his left paw. And raising his right paw to strike him. At that moment, the atheist screamed, Oh my God!

He was a bit like Khrushchev, the renowned premier of the Soviet Union in the 1960s, who once said, Thank God I'm an atheist.

[5 : 53] Time stopped. The bear froze. The forest was silent. A bright light shone on the atheist.

And he heard a voice. You deny my existence for all these years. You teach others I don't exist. And even credit creation to a cosmic accident.

Do you expect me to help you now out of this predicament? Am I to accept that you are a believer? The atheist looked up to the light and said, It would be hypocritical of me suddenly to ask you to treat me as a Christian now.

But perhaps you could make the bear a Christian. Very well, said the voice. The light disappeared.

And the sounds of the forest began to filter through the wind once more. And the bear dropped his right paw. He brought both paws together.

[7 : 05] Bowed his head and spoke. Lord, bless this food that I'm about to receive. From your gracious hand.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen. Not quite the conversion the atheist hoped for. So let me ask you.

What are you praying for? As you see our society go crazy in the heart of this Christmas. But not serious about the true heart of Christmas.

You know, I despair sometimes of the common sense of some of our political leaders in the United Kingdom. When it comes to this time of the year, I'm not too sure about them at other times either.

There are people all over the United Kingdom who are trying to delete Christ from Christmas. Even in Aberdeen this season, for advertising purposes, is being called our winter festival.

[8 : 18] Now friends, let's get real. I got an email recently from a relative in the United States that was entitled, The Christmas Tree.

Showing a well-lit and a well-decorated tree, it said this. This is a Christmas tree. It's not a Hanukkah bush. It's not a Nala plant.

It's not even a holiday hedge. It is a Christmas tree. Go on, she said. Say it. Christmas. Christmas. Celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ.

And you know, of course, there are millions in our nation, sadly, who this season will fail utterly to make the connection between their Christmas celebrations and the birth of Jesus Christ.

And that's a huge challenge for the Church of Jesus Christ. But the reality is that the vast majority of people in our land know that Christmas is not a winter festival.

[9 : 32] It is about the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. And as much a reality is this. Jews and Muslims also know and are not offended by it.

But there is a strong minority body of secularists who want it banned. Recently, the British Humanist Association published a report that, as its conclusion, wants to have Christians banned from public service.

The Association claims that Christians, Christian organizations, don't offer any distinctive benefits to the provision of public services.

My friends, that's our real enemy. Secular humanists who are not above misrepresenting us. And so I want to put to you this morning, in the midst of the Christmas season of 2007, are you prepared?

Now you have to recognize that I'm not asking you if you get all your Christmas cards out, or your turkey and trimmings ordered, or your presents bought, or reached your credit card limit, or emptied your bank account.

[11 : 00] I'm asking in the face of the challenge and the opportunities of this season in the year 2007, are you prepared? Prepared to point to Jesus?

Prepared to put Him at the center of your celebrations? Prepared to resist the challenges of secularism, ignorance, and indifference? Prepared to grasp the opportunities that such a moment brings to share the fullness of His grace and truth with those around you?

Are you prepared? Well, you know, the mighty God was in the business of preparation. He was so excited about the event we celebrate this season.

The coming of His only Son into a stable in Bethlehem. That He wanted to make adequate preparation. He wanted people to be prepared from the very beginning of human history.

He signaled to the human race that He so dearly loved that one was to come who was to clear up the mess of human selfishness. Speaking to the serpent in the Garden of Eden, God says of this Jesus, He will crush your head and you will strike His heel.

[12 : 28] Through the prophet Isaiah He speaks, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and will call Him Emmanuel. God with us.

God with us. And again, to us a child is born, to us a son is given and He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Oh, God was in the business of preparation. Are you prepared? And then we come to this amazing passage we read together in John's Gospel this morning.

Now, John says nothing really in great detail about the event of Jesus' birth. Indeed, his whole Gospel is really focused on the reason for the coming of Jesus, His passion, His death, and His resurrection.

But you cannot read what is called the prologue in the verses we read and not have your eyes and your heart drawn to Bethlehem.

[13 : 42] These words are about the baby and John's passion for the baby. My friends, this Christmas season, be passionate about Jesus.

Never let your Christian faith be reduced to what you do or to how you feel. But always let it be about your passion, your commitment to Jesus.

Because it was Jesus' passion for you that first brought Him to Bethlehem. And so I want to point you to these three foci from God's Word as they, as this most important question rings in your hearts this morning.

Are you prepared? Are you prepared? First of all, here there's the preparation for Jesus. You know, I think sometimes those of us who take the heart of the Christmas event seriously can get so excited about and carried away with the Christ child that we forget the context into which He was born.

we can so easily here within the church have the equivalent of what can so easily happen in society.

[15 : 10] If there's one thing that I've always found offensive as people talk about Christmas, it's this. It's really for the children.

And then the adults get busy on their spending and their earning while the Christ child is smothered in fake lights, tinsel, and wrapping paper.

involved in their overeating and drinking and domestic disputes. Well, we as a church can all too easily have our parallel failing, our theological disputes, and our often sentimental focus on the baby at the expense of who He is and why He came.

You see, from the Bible we know that the Jewish people were on the lookout for a Messiah, someone special from God.

We spoke just a moment ago about God, how He in different ways had been preparing them, but they had no idea how that Messiah would come.

[16 : 28] We know that the teenage Mary had had that discussion with the angel Gabriel. We know Joseph who was engaged to Mary had been visited by an angel as well.

It's all here. But then here too we learn of another family member in the story, a woman called Elizabeth. Elizabeth was Mary's cousin and we discover in the Bible that she too was pregnant at the same time as Mary.

She too was expecting a baby. Maybe that was the reason Mary went to visit Elizabeth. Mary possibly felt at least someone, someone, one of her relatives would understand her situation and it's highly likely that poor young Mary was having a hard time back there in Nazareth.

Elizabeth. But then when Mary met Elizabeth something was very strange happened to Elizabeth.

In Luke's Gospel and verse 41 of the first chapter we read these words. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting the baby leaped in her womb.

[17 : 47] That baby was John who was to become known as John the Baptist and it was as if he recognised deep in Elizabeth's womb the wonder, the wonder of the one who was in Mary's womb.

You know, I never read this account without praying that people who peddle abortion would see the true status and value of a growing embryo.

In time, of course, John the Baptist is the one who was called. Called to make preparation for Jesus' ministry. And what a man John the Baptist was.

Oh yes, he was unusual. He lived in strange places. He dressed in weird ways. He had a fascinating culinary taste.

But you know, his life was devoted. Devoted to preparing the way for his young cousin Jesus. Jesus. And he makes that absolutely clear in this remarkable passage that we read in John's Gospel.

[18 : 53] He was a true witness to Jesus. He was not the light. He was the witness to the light of Jesus. He testifies to Jesus.

He points to him. Elsewhere, we hear of John that he baptized Jesus for his ministry. He says of him, he's not worthy to untie Jesus' sandals.

And yet, in another place, he says this, he must increase, but I must decrease. What an incredible man and what a challenging example.

Do you want to do something for people this Christmas? Do you want in the midst of the noise and the false light and the fading glitter, to give people a really happy Christmas?

Then tell them about Jesus. Point them to Jesus, and I can tell you, Jesus will do the rest. That's all John the Baptist did.

[19 : 57] He pointed people to Jesus, and in so doing, was an essential cog in the preparation for Jesus. You can do that, can't you?

Are you prepared? Second point is this, the presence of Jesus, the presence of Jesus.

As sure as night follows day, Jesus came, and John wants us to be absolutely sure about that. You know, there was for many years a real debate about whether or not Jesus ever really existed as a living historical figure.

I sense that these days are now past. John was a no doubt. This baby of Bethlehem, yes, in the most mysterious way, the one who was there participating in the creation of the world.

world. Well, now, he was in the world. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth.

[21 : 17] In this child in the manger, grace and truth lived on this earth. You know, it's a real challenge to the Christian church to be at one and the same time gracious and truthful.

I've seen it. Those who are so wanting to be full of grace that truth becomes a victim, but also those whose God is truth and grace can so easily be sacrificed.

But Jesus was full of grace and full of truth, full of both. Oh, yes, he was rejected. The world didn't recognize him.

And my dear friends, the tragedy is that it still so often doesn't recognize him. His own didn't receive him and still his own people do not receive him.

that we had in Bethlehem the presence of the Son of God. And still we have this Jesus. And to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

[22 : 42] God, I wonder if you begin to understand what this means. You know, there is a theology that believes we're somehow all God's children by virtue of being human.

God's grace does it. God's Lord. But that's not what the Bible says here. It says we become, we become a child of God with all its responsibilities, all its opportunities, all its benefits by receiving this Jesus who is here.

You see, the presence of Jesus on earth and so in our hearts through faith is absolutely crucial to our destiny. as God's child this Christmas.

Let me ask you again. Are you prepared? And our final point is this, the priority of Jesus.

I suppose this really is the most important issue in Christian preaching. The priority of Jesus. And it was the most significant issue.

[23 : 58] for John the Baptist. Indeed, this I believe is his absolute genius. John was a man who had formed his own group of religious disciples.

I've often been to Israel and heard and indeed seen some of the evidence for that. He had disciples committed to his way of life and service.

others. And yet he had the heart, he had the courage, he had the vision, he had the wisdom to bless his own disciples as he saw them go and follow Jesus.

I tell you that for a human leader can be very hard. In my long ministry of thirty years in the one congregation, I walked with people as they've come to faith and as they've grown into fruitful disciples of Jesus Christ.

And then I watched them leave our church and find a spiritual home elsewhere. I tell you that's hard. But John never flinched.

[25 : 10] Why? Because he knew the ministry of the Lord that the Lord had given to him. He knew the calling that the Holy Spirit had laid upon his life.

He knew he was there to prepare the way for Jesus. Yes, the one who came after him, but who surpassed him because he was before him.

You see, John had learned the secret of a satisfied, not to say a sanctified life. And that was to give Jesus the priority.

God's love for God's life. He was in his life and ministry. And you know, I believe each season of Advent is a fresh opportunity for all of us to do just that, to renew our life and review our life and our ministry, to look again at our place in God's scheme of things.

And honestly see where Jesus fits in. to this end that we determine afresh, like John the Baptist, to give him, the Lord Jesus Christ, the priority.

[26 : 25] But are you prepared? This is a wonderful Sunday in the Christian year to be with you. We share with the world church our anticipation at that first coming of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world.

And I can think of no better question for young or old to be confronted with in the light of God's word than this one.

Are you prepared? There is the preparation of John the Baptist for Jesus. Are you prepared? Above all else, Christmas is about the presence of Jesus.

Are you prepared to celebrate his coming afresh, and introduce him to others? He is here. And I leave you with the priority of Jesus.

Are you prepared to put him first in your life, then to step back and let others see him in you?

[27 : 34] Are you prepared? Are you prepared? Are you prepared? Amen. Amen. Thank you.