

The Peace Child

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 24th December 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst – Carol Service

Readings:

Introduction:

Welcome to our Carol Service. It's lovely to have you here to celebrate with us this evening. I hope you've enjoyed the service so far, and that you'll have something to talk about with friends and family. We've had a mix of well-known traditional carols and newer ones, some for everyone to join in with, and others to listen to, as well as five readings telling the story of Christmas from the Bible.

I wonder if there's a song that particularly sums up Christmas for you? Could it be *So here it is, Merry Christmas, everybody's having fun?* Or *White Christmas*? Would your vote be with Wham's *Last Christmas*, which finally achieved the no. 1 position, 39 years after being beaten to that position by *Do they know it's Christmas* by Band Aid.

Maybe Christmas is not looking so good, and you'd rather listen to Taylor Swift's *'Tis the damn season?*

What about tonight's carols? I wonder which one members of the Choir would choose? I think there might be a few votes for *Gaudete*, the last carol they sang this evening, which happens to fit today as it is Gaudete Sunday. Did you know that? It's so named because Gaudete means

“Rejoice”, and the third Advent candle on our Advent ring is often used to represent joy. The candle for the second Sunday in Advent represents peace, and I read that the Methodist Church have suggested that it is left unlit in solidarity with those who are suffering through the terrible war in the Middle East.

Transformation

Perhaps we’d rather not be reminded of that. How sad that 2,000 years after Jesus was born in the Holy Land there’s as much brutality and violence as there was in the days of the Roman Empire. Isn’t Christmas an opportunity to escape for a few hours from the horrors of the world, and retreat into a nice warm, cozy cocoon of candles and beautiful music? (The church heating is doing its best, I assure you!)

I’d like to think that the Christian celebration of Christmas is actually the best way to face the troubles of the world, and the problems we face as well. If we think about the Christmas story, it has a profound message of hope in the midst of suffering and adversity. Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem because of a census imposed by the Roman occupation force, a means of controlling a subject people. There was no room for them in the inn, and Jesus’ first cradle was a rough-hewn feeding trough for animals. Ordinary, working-class shepherds were the ones to whom the army of angels sang to announce the birth of the Saviour of the world. In the story of Jesus, God takes the world as it is, and through the message of peace and reconciliation transforms it, one heart at a time, one family at a time.

As St John wrote in his Gospel, “to those who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God”¹ – just as Jesus himself was the Son of God. As St Athanasius said, he became like us so that we could become like him.

Jesus started a revolution, but not a political or military revolution. He called people to follow him, to trust him, to turn away from a self-centred life and be reconciled to God. His followers have cured the sick, built hospitals, campaigned for social reforms, abolished the slave trade, and brought hostile factions together for the common good. The four candles of Advent are often used to represent hope, peace, joy and love, all things which flourish when we receive Jesus as our Saviour and trust him as our Lord.

There’s a true story which illustrates what can happen when people turn to Jesus and start following him. It happened in the 1960s in Irian Jaya, which is the western half of the island of New Guinea, and is told in the book and film “Peace Child” by Don Richardson, a Canadian missionary who, with his wife Carol, went to live among the Sawi, a stone-age tribe who were headhunters and cannibals.

Don and Carol learnt their language, and were able to share the story of Jesus with them. But they came up against a huge cultural barrier: treachery was a quality greatly admired by the tribe, and so when they were told that Jesus was betrayed by Judas, they laughed and thought Judas was the hero of the story. The village the Richardsons lived in had frequent battles with a neighbouring village, in which

¹ John 1:12

people were killed or wounded, and after a while Don and Carol told them that unless they were willing to make peace with their neighbours, they would be leaving and moving somewhere else.

It was through this unlikely circumstance that God enabled the missionaries to help the Sawi understand the gospel message. The village decided to make peace, using a traditional custom known as the “peace child”. In a ceremony where both villages came together, a baby from the Richardsons’ village was given to representatives of the other village as a peace offering, to be brought up by a family from that village. As long as the child lived, there would be peace between the two villages.

The baby that was given was the only child of the leader of the warriors – a great sacrifice on the part of him and his wife. The two villages were reconciled. But more than that, Don and Carol were able to explain how God the Father had done the same thing – given his only Son to the world so that we might be reconciled to him. The father of the child from the Sawi village was the first to become a Christian, and many others followed. You can watch the half-hour film all about the story on Youtube.²

This Christmas, it is this great gift from God that we celebrate – the gift of his own Son to become a child of a human family, to live, teach, heal and give his life for us all. Through his death on the Cross and his resurrection from the dead, Jesus has become the means by which the chasm between us and God can be breached, and we can know God

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pb8jTYrLhQ>

as *our* Father, just as Jesus did. God gave his Son to become like us, so that we could become like him.

The message of Christmas is that God is reaching out to a broken and hurting world, and to each one of us, to wrap us in his loving arms and welcome us home to him. I don't know what that means to you: is it just a nice idea, or is it real to you? Do you know God as your loving heavenly Father, or is he a distant deity who may or may not exist?

If you'd like to explore what Christianity is all about, we'd be delighted to help you. In the pews you will find a little booklet, called *Christmas in three words*, which you are welcome to take away. If you'd like to talk to someone, please fill in the Welcome card in the pew and either hand it to me or put it in the black metal box near the door. And of course, everyone is welcome to any of our regular Sunday services, some of which you can watch online.

So what would be my favourite Christmas carol this year? It has to be the one we sang before this sermon, *Hark, the herald angels sing*, which sums up this message perfectly:

Hark! the herald angels sing
glory to the new-born King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled:

... mild he lays his glory by,
born that man no more may die,
born to raise the sons of earth,
born to give them second birth:

*Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King.*

He became like us, so that we might become like him.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

May you know the grace and the truth of the Word made flesh this Christmas, and always. Amen.