

The Christmas Song

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[0 : 00] We've just heard from Luke's Gospel, and we're going to stay in Luke's Gospel as we consider Christmas this morning.

But before we do that, consider for a moment some of our most popular Christmas songs. Let me read out some of the lyrics to you. I'm going to read them out, not sing them out. You'll be relieved to know.

And I want you to do two things. Firstly, tell me which song they come from. That will be really, really easy for both of you. And then just think, what's the common theme that binds them together? So song number one, really, really easy. You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why. What song is that from?

There you go, easy one. Okay, how about this one? Also pretty easy. And if you ever saw it, you would even say, it glows.

[1 : 06] There you go, yep, easy as well. Okay, just one more, slightly harder. With the kids jingle belling and everyone telling you, be of good cheer.

Anyone knows that one? Okay, let me read one more line from that song. There will be scary ghost stories and tales of the glories of Christmases long, long ago.

Anyone got that? No? Well, it's Andy Williams' It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year, which is statistically, apparently, one of the most played Christmas songs of all time.

Now, I wonder if you notice the common theme that binds them together. These songs and many other Christmas songs that you'll hear around this time move us into the land of let's pretend.

Let's move into a world where Santa Claus exists and Rudolph comes to visit. A world where it's never stressful, but always wonderful.

[2 : 14] A world full of nicely decorated gifts and everyone buys each other nice things. It's Christmas, after all. So for men, that means it's time to turn off the reality switch and time to turn on the fantasy switch.

After all, if there's one time of the year that we should do this, that we can do this, it should be Christmas, shouldn't it? Christmas is as good a time as any to escape the real world.

A time where we can forget about things like rabies and politically charged rallies and life with all kinds of disease. But there's a problem with playing let's pretend.

It's this. You can't escape the real world forever. The reality switch, at some point, has to come back on. Eventually, we all need to come back to the real world.

Our world, where bad news is an ever-present reality. A world in which we struggle with everything from chronic pain, to family fights, to the bare fact that we are not all that we wish to be.

[3 : 33] As we saw in that video we just watched. Eventually, the Christmas music stops, and we sigh, knowing that the new year is upon us, and with it new challenges, perhaps new pain, and new feelings.

And when it does, let's pretend offers no lasting solutions. Pretending might be fun for a while, especially if life is good at the moment.

But bad news will come. And let's pretend offers nothing when you're staring deaf in the face in the form of a cancer diagnosis, or you're wondering why in the world did you hurt your loved one for the thousandth time, or when all your carefully laid plans all come crashing down.

And if that's all Christmas is, a game of let's pretend, then really it's hardly worth celebrating, is it? What we really need is something that is true, something that is real, something that is good in a world gone bad. Now here's the good news.

[4 : 53] The Christmas story says that something exists. And he's not really a thing. His name is Jesus. In our Bible reading today, we are told that his birth is good news of great joy.

But hang on a second, how can it be? You see, for many, Jesus also falls into the category of let's pretend. Isn't he like Santa Claus?

A myth? A legend? Mere fiction? Or if he's not, he's at least like Saint Nicholas. Someone who really did exist over a thousand years ago, but is otherwise distant and irrelevant to us today. He may as well be a pretend person. Or perhaps, he's more like Asmin Ali or Rafi Z. Ramli. So he may not be a myth or a legend, but he's a preference.

You have your hero, I have mine. You have your inspiration, I have mine. You like Asmin, I like Rafi Z. And if Jesus is your thing, that's great.

[6 : 06] I'm glad he works for you. But I've got my thing that works for me. Jesus becomes simply a preference. But the Bible blows that kind of thinking right out of the water.

You will have noticed that the narrator of our Christmas story this morning is a man called Luke. And Luke, you see, is a doctor and a historian.

He's not the kind of person who indulges in games of let's pretend. He's a man who is interested in truth, who is invested in truth, and who is investigating the truth.

As he tells us back in Luke chapter 1. And what he discovers is that Christmas is about truth that is true for everyone, everywhere, at all times, regardless of your preference.

And that's good news. Because it's also the kind of truth that will see you through in the hospital bed, in the times of regret, in the moments when your soul begins to crack.

[7 : 16] And so what I'm just going to do for the rest of this morning is to work through what Luke's discovered in Luke chapter 2, verse 1 to 20. That story is on the sheets in front of you.

And let me just show you three things that he says about the truth of Christmas. Firstly, this truth is tangible. This truth is tangible.

That simply means it's not abstract. Look at how Luke begins the Christmas story in verses 1 to 3. In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that the census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone went to their own town to register. Luke doesn't begin with in a land far, far away.

He doesn't begin with once upon a time. Instead, he begins with in those days, Caesar. He's not writing fairy tales.

[8 : 21] He's reporting news. He names the Roman ruler of the day, Caesar Augustus, as well as the governor of Syria, Quirinius, both known historical figures.

These are real people. Caesar Augustus was the great nephew of Julius Caesar, who won a decisive battle over his great rival, Anthony, in 31 BC, and whose reign was characterized by peace.

And he's very much in charge. When you give an order for a census to be taken over the entire Roman world, you pretty much have to be the most powerful man alive.

Again and again, just that detail, taking a census, is something that we can find in the historical records. Luke is signaling to us as clearly as he can.

We're not talking about let's pretend here. We're talking about real people, real places, real events, and real lives.

[9 : 25] When we talk about the Christmas story, we're talking about actual history, not mere fantasy. You see, this is where Christianity is unique among the world's religions.

History matters to the Christian faith in a way it doesn't to the others. For example, let's contrast it with Buddhism. The heart of Buddhism lies in the wisdom statements of Buddha.

In other words, the core of Buddhism is not a historical event, but ideas, philosophies. And so it doesn't matter if Buddha had his moment of enlightenment somewhere else than India, or at some other point in history.

In fact, it doesn't even matter if someone else other than the Buddha had those ideas. It's Buddha's ideas about karma and the four noble truths that matters, not the historical circumstances.

The essence of Buddhism is not historical. Or let's take Islam. Now, Islam does depend upon a historical event.

[10 : 38] It's that moment when Prophet Muhammad says he encountered the angel Gabriel and received the Quranic revelation. That's the basis of Islam. But unlike Christianity, we don't have any details other than what was given by Muhammad himself.

We simply have to accept or reject the testimony of Prophet Muhammad. And the point is, historically speaking, it's virtually impossible to verify. But the Christian faith is very different. It depends fundamentally on the number of events that are said to have taken place in history, all recorded by a variety of witnesses. If the Christmas story is not historical, Christianity fails. But the way it is historical, that means Christianity is not just some pie in the sky out there, but it is something that affects you today. So that's the first thing we need to realise about the truth of Christmas. It's historical. It's tangible. It's verifiable. And it's political.

[11 : 57] Just put yourself in the shoes of a Jew during that time for a moment. Verse 1 reminds you, rather painfully, that you're being governed by a puppet government under Syrian and Roman power.

You're not in control. They are. And when the emperor takes a census, it affects your lives. You have no choice but to make travel plans to go where you can be counted.

And for the Jews, that means that means journeying to their ancestral home. And so Joseph, like many other Jews, needs to get onto Google Maps and start plotting his path back to Bethlehem. Well, that's how tangible the Christmas story is. It affects even your travel movements and your holiday plans. And this brings us to the second thing about this truth.

This truth is significant. It's significant. Now, at first, it doesn't seem so. In verse 4, the camera shifts from looking at the emperor to this man called Joseph.

[13 : 11] Now, by now, most of us are familiar with that name, even if we are not Christians, because we know him as the father of Jesus. But don't forget, if we have lived then, Joseph is completely insignificant.

He's just another citizen. Luke has been talking about Caesar Augustus, the equivalent of the United States president today. He's mentioned Quirinius, the local Yang di Petuan Negeri. But now, certainly, he concentrates on Joseph, who's a noble authority. And he concentrates on a place that no one has heard of, Bethlehem. We're not talking about the equivalent of London, OKL, or even Kuching.

We're talking about the equivalent of Lawas. Apologies to those of you from Lawas. But hang on. Just look a little closer, and there's more going on here than we realise. Sure, Bethlehem is not the financial or cultural capital of the Roman Empire. But it is significant.

[14 : 23] Luke draws our attention to that fact by pointing out that it's the town of David. Who is this David? And what's so special about him? Well, David is a king.

And not just any king, but for the Jews, one of the greatest kings in their history. He's the one who has brought peace to their land previously. But most importantly, he's the king whom God made promises through.

He's been promised that one day, another king would emerge from his line. And this would be no ordinary king, but a king who would rescue his people.

A king who could repair this world. A king who would live forever and ever. We heard some of that in our Old Testament readings this morning. And according to their prophets, Bethlehem is going to be the birthplace of this king.

And now, in just one line, we're told, verse 4, that Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee in Judea to Bethlehem, the town of David.

[15 : 32] Why? Because he belonged to the house and line of David. And now, this journey, just one of many being undertaken, takes on renewed significance.

And especially as we read verse 5. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him, and was expecting a child.

There's a baby involved. And look, again, he's helping us to see, even before he's born, whose child this is going to be. Yes, he's his marriage child, but more significantly, he is David's descendant.

It looks like the time for that promised king is finally here. Do you see what this means? This means that this is not just something that has religious significance for religious people.

Christmas isn't just something that matters for one day a year, or a few weeks every December.

This Christmas story is truth with actual significance in the actual world all the time.

[16 : 48] Jesus, the king who's going to fix all that is wrong with this world, is being born. This isn't let's pretend. This matters.

And God is behind it all. Caesar Augustus looks like the guy in charge. He's the one who's issuing decrees and taking censuses. But behind Caesar stands God, who guides this ordinary bureaucratic act so that Jesus will be born in Bethlehem.

God is using these rather ordinary events of history to pave the way for a life of destiny. God is keeping his promises.

Jesus. But he does it in the most ordinary of ways, verses 6 and 7. How they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

She wrapped him in clothes and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. This doesn't sound like a royal birth, being televised, with an entire nation holding its breath to hear about whether there's a new heir to the throne.

[18:09] There's not even a hospital or clinic in sight. And contrary to many of our popular songs and nativity scenes, there's probably no inn either.

Most scholars agree now that Joseph and Mary were probably in the house of a relative in the only quarters available to them, where the animals were.

this is hardly the setting you would expect of one born to be king. But it's a vital clue as to what sort of king he's going to be.

As one born in humble circumstances and humble surroundings, he's going to become the humble king. And those two words, humble and king, are important.

You see, Jesus is not simply a cute baby. he's God himself, come down in human flesh. He really is the king. But what should astonish us is that God himself is found to be humble.

[19:13] That doesn't mean that he thinks himself worthless or without value. That's not a right definition of humility. Rather, being humble has to do with how we view our rights and how we view our relations with others.

And Jesus did not cling to what was his by right. He might be the king, but he did not let his position define his mission.

Instead, he came to be born as a man in the midst of some rather strong smelling animals. Later on in his life, he would ride into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey.

And finally, he would die like a common criminal on a wooden cross. But why? Why live like this? Well, that brings us to our third and most important truth this morning. Thirdly, this truth is good news of great joy. It's good news of great joy.

[20:21] From the guest room, we now move out into the fields. And that's where we find the announcement of this birth being made, verses 8 and 9. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. Well, finally, we have something fitting for a king.

Nothing less than the heavenly messengers appearing to the shepherds, welcoming his entrance into the world. And how do they announce the birth of Jesus?

See what they say in verse 10. The angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

This, you see, is the very essence of Christianity. This is the very essence of Christmas. At the very heart of Christmas and Christianity is good news.

[21:26] Not good cheer. Not good advice. Not good intentions. Good news. A report of a momentous, transforming event.

When Caesar Augustus was born, well, that was exactly how the media of the day proclaimed his birth. they made a public announcement that brought joy. They openly broadcasted to the entire empire.

The king has been born, they said. But Luke now tells us this is on a whole different level. This news is announced by heaven itself.

And it's for everyone. Do you see that at the end of verse 10? It will cause great joy for all the people. When a baby is born, that's usually seen as good news, isn't it?

It's good news for the mummy and daddy and grandma and grandpa. But this isn't just good news for the immediate family. This is good news for everybody.

[22:35] And just like the good news of a baby being born changes lives, it changes lives for the parents, for the brothers and sisters. So this good news is meant to change our lives.

It brings us into a new normal. But why is it so good? Verse 11, today, in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you.

He is the Messiah, the Lord. Here's the good news we celebrate this morning. Two thousand years ago, in the town of David, the promised king, the promised Messiah that the world has been waiting for, has arrived.

And listen to what he's like. He's the Lord. That means he's the one who created and rules all things.

He was there when the earth's foundations were laid and the dimensions were measured. He's the one who gives orders to the morning and shows the dawn its place, who has journeyed into the depths of the sea and into the recesses of the deep.

[23 : 53] And in the Old Testament, it is the Lord who has preserved and persevered with his people. And that same title, Lord, is now used of Jesus.

This is what heaven is announcing. This is no mere human king. This is not just another Caesar. This is God himself come down to earth. As one of the lesser-known Christmas carols puts it, lo, within a manger lies he who built the starry skies.

I'll just let that sink in for a moment. This means God is not hidden. He's near. Near, not in a mystical, I feel something in my heart kind of way.

Not near in a let's pretend way. He's near in a concrete, historically verifiable, public way. The shepherds saw him.

The wise men saw him. Mary and Joseph themselves saw him. They saw the Lord. But he's not just the Lord. He's the saviour.

[25 : 08] That's what the angels announced. That's why Jesus has come. He didn't come to receive applause and say, hello subjects, I decided I better make an appearance among the peasants so that you can all admire me and flatter me.

He came to suffer and die. Can you imagine that? A king who didn't just come to mingle amongst the common people, just to see what it's like to live among them and offer some sympathy?

He went further than that. He's a king who offered himself as a sacrifice on behalf of his people. But why?

Well, this is where we realise that the Christmas story offers truth not only about God, but about ourselves. And this is the ugly truth. We're not good people.

If we were, then it makes absolutely no sense for Jesus to come to be born and die. But it's true. We're not good people. All of us.

[26 : 20] We say the wrong words to people. We think the wrong thoughts about others. We look at the wrong things. We listen to the wrong ideas. And above all, we act wrongly towards God, the one who made us, who provided for us and love us greatly.

Now we can play let's pretend still, pretending that we're okay. We're not perfect, but we're not bad, we say. But God sees our hearts, and he knows the truth.

We're not good people. And that is why our world is in such a terrible situation. sin. It's because of what I've just described here, what the Bible calls sin.

It's when we push God out of the picture and decide to run the world ourselves. But imagine a five-year-old kicking and screaming that he wants to be in charge of a nuclear reactor, and he doesn't want any nuclear scientists around.

He wants to play around with it and push buttons he doesn't understand. You can just imagine the terrible consequences, can't you? And when we mess around with the world and go against the ultimate authority, God, well, there are severe penalties.

[27 : 43] Death and separation from the source of love and life, God himself. And the Bible says everyone is a sinner, no exceptions, you and me.

And that's why everyone needs a saviour, no exceptions, you and me. And on that day, 2,000 years ago, in the town of David, a saviour was born.

He came to suffer in our place so that if we turn from our rebellion and place our trust in him, we can be rescued. And while governments come and governments go, as Malaysians discovered this year, his government will be forever.

It won't just last 61 years. It will go on and on and on into eternity. A perfect reign, untainted by corruption, unmoved by external forces, untouched by sin.

That's the good news of great joy and that's the Christmas song. And so that's why when the Christmas song had been heard, the shepherds hurried to see Jesus for themselves.

[29 : 06] And that's why verse 17, having seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. And that's why verse 20, they glorify and they praise God for all the things that they have heard and seen.

This isn't let's pretend. This really happened. This is real. This is true. This is good. This is tangible. This is significant. And above all, this is good news. So this morning, let's forget about pretending. Let's stop thinking that Christmas, it's just something up in the air out there somewhere which never touches your life down here. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Instead, we should be thinking instead, what are you going to do with this news? What are you going to do with this news? things? You can ignore it. You can brush it off.

[30 : 11] You can try to discredit it. Or you can look further into it. You can accept it and you can receive it with great joy. The one thing you cannot do is to say it didn't happen.

You can't say it doesn't matter. So today, if you've never really thought about Christmas this way, let me invite you to start looking into the Christmas story seriously.

Let me invite you to take Jesus seriously. We have courses designed for anyone wanting to explore Christianity running in 2019. And of course, go ahead and talk to your friends who know Jesus. ask them who is he all about? Or come talk to me. Come each week to hear the Bible explained in our church. But don't just explore.

At some point, Jesus will challenge you. Are you ready to leave your old life behind and let Jesus run your life from now on?

[31 : 23] That's what the Bible calls repentance. And are you ready to say, thank you Jesus, that although I went against God, through you I have been brought back into friendship with him?

Well, that's called faith. And God desires your repentance and your faith. So today, will you hurry to see Jesus?

And that applies even if you're a Christian as well. Will we hurry to see Jesus again? As we said two days ago, did we remove him from our lives?

That we forgotten about him? Well, let's hurry to see him. As we end, I just want all of us to take a moment of silence now.

Decide on your next course of action. Are you going to explore? Are you going to accept? God, are you going to rejoice?

[32 : 27] So let's just take a moment of silence, and then I will lead us in prayer. Father, it is true how sweet the day when Christ was born.

We thank you so much that we know that the birth of Jesus is indeed a historical event that really happened here on earth thousands of years ago.

But we thank you that it's also good news of great joy, not just for people 2,000 years ago, but for us here today. Because you, the Lord Jesus, have come to rescue us from ourselves, from our sin. Father, for some of us here today, perhaps we've never really heard the Christmas story told this way. And if so, Father, I just pray, Lord, that you would move such people to come and explore Jesus for themselves, to see who he is, to see what he has done.

Perhaps there are even some of us ready this morning to put our faith in Jesus. And so, Father, I just pray that you help them to take that step, even if it might be a bit scary, to help them to hand over control to Jesus.

[33 : 49] And Father, for many of us who already profess faith in you, will help us to be filled with excitement and joy once again, knowing that this is who we worship and this is who we follow.

And may we remember that his government will last forever and ever. And may we serve him all our days. All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.