

CHRISTMAS DAY - A Sure Saying

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[0 : 0 0] This is the Christmas Day service at Holy Trinity in 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled, A Sure Saying, and is based on 1 Timothy, chapter 1, verses 1 to 12.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you're a God who speaks to us clearly in the words of Scripture that testify about your Son, and we pray that you'll speak to us now, that these words may not only be in our minds, but in our hearts, that we may believe them for the glory of Jesus.

Amen. It was reputed to be a piece of graffiti. I'm not quite sure whether this is true or an urban myth, but simply saying, Jesus saves.

And underneath, somebody had added to it, which bank? Jesus saves, but which bank? That's a little saying, Jesus saves, that people have added to over the years.

In the first of the Bible readings today, from the first letter of Paul to Timothy, Paul passes on what he calls a sure saying, a faithful or reliable, trustworthy saying.

[1 : 1 5] Paul is vouching for its truthfulness, its reliability and trustworthiness. Simply, he says, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

And in a nutshell, that's the meaning of Christmas. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. This, St. Paul says, is a saying that is worthy of our full acceptance.

That is not something to be ambivalent about, to doubt or disbelieve. Not a saying that may be true for some and not for others, or it's not a saying that you can take it or leave it.

It's not a saying to apply in some circumstances and not others. Like the saying, he who hesitates is lost, is countered by, you know, look before you leap. This is a saying that is worthy of our full acceptance, to be firmly believed and firmly trusted, firmly held onto by all people in all times.

Years ago, I used to do summer holiday programs with an organization called Scripture Union. And each day we would teach a memory verse. It's not a bad practice, not just for children, but for adults as well.

[2 : 1 8] And if you want a memory verse for today and to hold onto, not just for the rest of this year, that's too short, but for a year to come, this is a great memory verse. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

That little saying raises a number of issues. Who? Who? Christ. A Greek word we're very familiar with, the Hebrew that it translates is Messiah. Again, a word that we're familiar with, probably Christ or Messiah, literally the anointed one.

In the Old Testament part of the Bible, a bit of the Bible that looks forward to Jesus coming, the anointed one would be a king, sometimes a priest and another sort of leader, to be anointed with oil for their office.

But over the course of time, there was a growing expectation that the anointed one would come, not just another king or another priest, but rather the one who would deliver God's people to God, restore them in a relationship with God, defeat the enemies once and for all, preserve and protect the boundaries and the land of the people of God.

And as the Old Testament history went on, there was an increasing expectation of this heroic Messiah, or Greek term Christ, who would come, the one who would usher in God's perfect kingdom.

[3 : 30] So that's the Christ. But we're told in this little saying of Paul, or from Paul, Christ Jesus. Jesus was his personal name, if you like, Christ the title. And Jesus was a fairly common name in Jesus' day.

Literally in Hebrew, Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, a common name even today. And literally that word means, God saves. Yahweh or Jehovah, as the name of God in the Old Testament is, saves.

So the whole name of Jesus is bound up with his mission. Christ Jesus came into the world to save. So that's the who, Christ Jesus. Where? He came into the world.

It's an odd expression really. St. Paul may have said, Christ Jesus was born to save. And that's often how it's termed in some of our Christmas carols. Fair enough too. But the language Paul uses here seems to make an implication.

Christ Jesus came into the world, implying from somewhere else, from not the world, from heaven that is. Because the Bible's testimony is that Jesus didn't begin in Bethlehem, in a stable, in a manger.

[4 : 36] Jesus existed before then. But he came into the world as one who'd existed from the beginning of time, but he began human life at Christmas. In effect, adding to what was already his divine life before he became a human being.

Fully divine, fully human from the time of Christmas. But before Christmas he existed. Fully divine, but not human. So Jesus Christ came into the world, into the world which humans live in.

A world that is full of nobility and good things, but also full of frailty, frustration, failure as well. Christmas marks his entry into the world. Who? Christ Jesus, where he came into the world.

Why? Simply put, he came to save sinners. Brett Mann thought he was safe. He wasn't aware of the danger, and he lost his life. His two friends thought they were safe.

They weren't aware of the danger either. They were lucky. They didn't lose their lives. But as you've heard and read about in the last few days, those two friends of his climbed into a tree, and for 22 hours, while the crocodile circled beneath them, they hung on for dear life before being rescued.

[5 : 40] Brett Mann, their friend, who thought it was safe to swim, was taken by the crocodile. Most of us live this life as though there is no danger from our failures and from our sins. We live this life as though it's safe, as though we don't need saving.

We don't even need any danger signs. We somehow think that sin is for really bad people. You know, the naughty kids who are standing here, or maybe the kids who are a bit further out that direction.

We think somehow that sin is for the really bad people, the Hitlers and Pol Potts of previous generations, the Amroxis, the Bin Ladins of our own generation. Somehow we think that we're good enough. And often we think that a saying that we like to accept is God helps those who help themselves.

And we think, well, we help ourselves. We're fairly good. So therefore, God will respond in kind to us. But that's not a saying that's biblical, and it's not a saying worthy of full acceptance. A saying that's worthy of full acceptance is Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

And the thing is that we're in danger of sin. We need saving from sin. In fact, history, not only the Bible story, but history in general is the story of God and humanity keeping their distance from each other, because humanity fails God.

[6 : 45] Sin, you see, is not just gross evil, child abuse and terrorist bombs and all that sort of stuff. Sin is when we don't love God all the time. And at the end of each day, when we go to bed and lay our head on our pillow before we fall asleep, if we're really honest with ourself, we'd say, I have not lived this day fully in love of God, because I've loved myself, I've loved my family, my wealth, my job, or whatever it is.

Sin is also not loving others as ourself always. And again, when we put our head on the pillow at night, if we're honest with ourself, brutally honest, the same can be said. I've not spent this day fully in love for my neighbour, any person whom I have had contact with.

You see, sin is failing to be perfect. It may be really, really, really good, but failing to be perfect, falling short of God's standard, turning our back on God, forgetting God, not loving him, not loving our neighbour all the time.

Sin's not believing God's word that he tells us, the sure sayings, for example, as we've got before us this morning. You see, when we realise that's what the Bible says is sin, our society thinks it's really bad evil, and that's part of it, but when we realise that sin really is just maybe being nice and good and honourable, but still falling short of a perfect, holy standard of God, then we have to acknowledge we're sinners.

And so when we read that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, that means that Christ Jesus came into the world to save us. And what's wrong? We can't save ourselves from our sin.

[8 : 06] Set yourself the challenge. Tomorrow, your first conscious thought, today I will be perfect. When you go to bed at night, you're brutally honest, you will have failed. I mean, even today, I could say now, here it is, it's 10.31 in the morning on Christmas Day.

For the rest of today, be perfect. And I'll bet you, when you go to bed tonight, if you're honest, you'll have to admit you've not been. I mean, after all, on Christmas Day, isn't it a time for fighting with our family? Rid yourself of sin?

You can't do it. Be perfect today? You can't do it. We can't save ourselves from sin. We live our life as though we're able to, that we're in control, that we've got free will, that we'll control what we do and we make the decisions.

We don't see the danger signs. We think we're safe. But the reality is we need a saviour, a rescuer, to save us from our sins. And it's been said that if God thought that our greatest need was education, he would have sent us a teacher.

If God thought our greatest need was physical healing and health, he'd have sent us a doctor. If God thought our greatest need was positive thinking, he would have sent us a psychologist. Our greatest need is forgiveness.

[9 : 10] And so he sent us a saviour. Now, of course, if you believe that you're not really a sinner, then Christmas is actually irrelevant for you. I'm not actually sure why you're here, to be honest. I'd have been in bed still.

If you believe you're not a sinner, Christmas is meaningless. Because Christmas is, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And if you're not a sinner, you'd say, well, it's all very nice. He did it for other people, but it's nothing to do with me.

I don't need him. But such people, and that's you if perhaps, actually live in an unreal world. It's a denial of reality to think that you're not a sinner, that you haven't failed God's standards.

You claim to be without sin. You've deceived yourself. But for those who know reality, then Christmas is highly relevant because Christ Jesus came into the world to save us. In the film, The Matrix, the humans in that film live in a make-believe world, a matrix.

They think it's real, but it's not. They think they are in control and have free will, but they don't. They're actually subject to the computer programming within the matrix that is controlling them.

[10 : 10] And in fact, unknown to them, the humans in that film, they actually need rescuing. They think they're in control, but they're not. They're actually enslaved to the computer programs of the matrix. And so Keanu Reeves is the saviour hero figure in the film.

Well, too many humans live in a fool's paradise. They live in an unreal world. They think that somehow they're good enough for God, that they're not really sinners, that they don't need saving, that life's all very well and God somehow has to reward them.

But it's a fool's paradise. It's unreality. The reality is each and every person needs saving from their sins, from their failures, from their falling short of God's perfect and holy standards of loving him and each other as ourselves.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That is a sure saying and it's worthy of full acceptance. So the who Christ Jesus, where into the world, why to save sinners?

How? That verse doesn't tell us, but through the pages of the New Testament, it's crystal clear. How? By dying on a cross and rising from the dead. So Good Friday and Easter, which we'll celebrate in a few months' time, in effect complete the story.

[11 : 17] They add the how to the who, where and why. Now we might just think, oh yes, this is a nice little memory verse. It's a little slogan, a little abstract statement that might encourage me. But it's not actually just to be abstract.

The point is, it's to be deeply personal. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, not out there, but me. And so St. Paul writing this letter to Timothy, who was the head of a church in a place called Ephesus in his years as a minister.

Paul goes on to finish the verse by saying, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost. You see, the Apostle Paul, the great Christian leader, knew that he was a sinner and he needed saving.

And he says this statement, not just as a sort of nice abstract saying to put up on your fridge, but to apply to himself. He needed saving. And he wrote it to Timothy because Timothy was in the same boat.

And so he's saying to Timothy, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners like you. And Timothy was the pastor of a church. And he wrote it to Timothy, not just for Timothy's sake, but for the church's sake. So Timothy, your church needs saving.

[12 : 23] Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners like the people in your church. And it's recorded for us 2,000 years later in the words of Scripture, because what's being said to you and me today in 2003 AD is that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners like you and like me, because we're all in the same boat.

We all need saving. And we need to apply this personally, not just as an abstract statement of what Jesus might have done for some other people, but what he did for you and me. And that's why at the end of that reading, the Apostle Paul is full of praise to God, to the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever.

Amen. Because when we realise what God has done by sending Christ Jesus into the world to save us, then our hearts surely are full of praise and thanks and indeed relief.

You imagine the relief of those two friends of Brett Mann when finally they were rescued from the tree under which the crocodile was circling. You imagine their thanks to their rescuers. The relief and thanks of Stuart Diver dug out of the Threadbow landslide or people dug out of earthquakes in other parts of the world.

People saved from a boat like that Englishman in the yacht races he was sailing south of Australia a few years ago, Tony Bullimore. Imagine their relief and thanksgiving. Well so too should it be for us.

[13 : 37] So for those who are sinners, Christmas is a time of great relief, great thanksgiving, great praise to God. But if you don't think you're a sinner, then really what's the point? If you don't think you're a sinner, if you're living in that unreal world, then Christmas is just sentimental nonsense in the end.

But for those of us who acknowledge our sin, that we fall short of God, that we need saving, Christmas is a time of great praise, great thanks and great relief that God sent us a saviour, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners like you and like me.

Thanks be to God that he did. Amen.