

CHRISTMAS EVE - The Spirit of Christmas

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the 2002 Christmas Eve service at Holy Trinity. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled The Spirit of Christmas and is based on 1 John 4, verses 7-14.

Well, poor old Santa has come in for some flack recently. I don't know whether you've followed Santa's story in the media in the last few weeks, but it seems that he just can't win. For example, there are some Victorian kindergartens where Santa is banned, prohibited, not allowed to enter because he's regarded as too Christian.

And that decision by some of the kindergartens has been endorsed by the kindergarten parents of Victoria Association or Society or whoever they are. They regarded that in a multicultural society it's politically correct not to have Santa as part of a kindergarten.

It would be offensive to the large part of our society that is not Christian. But on the other hand, the leader of the Salvation Army in Victoria, John Dalziel, has been criticised by members of the Salvation Army for having Santa Claus at some of the Salvation Army events and fundraising events.

[1 : 2 5] And he's been criticised because Santa is regarded as not being Christian enough. He's just regarded by some as a commercial creation of Coca-Cola, although in response Dalziel says that Santa is the spirit of Christmas.

I must say, I find that statement by a Christian leader a little bit astonishing. But poor old Santa. Some regard him as too Christian, therefore they ban him. Some regard him as not Christian enough and therefore they ban him.

It seems all he's trying to do is do his job and that is give toys to good boys and girls. What about us adults, I always reckon? What is the spirit that Santa conveys if he is the spirit of Christmas, if he's so central?

Is it a spirit of fun? Or maybe a spirit of greed? Some would say a spirit of love or family values. What are his values?

What sort of values does Santa Claus promote at Christmas time? That all people are good? After all, I've yet to meet a boy or girl who's refused a present from Santa because they're bad.

[2 : 3 5] What sort of love does Santa promote? Love for the good boys and girls? Love within the limits of the wallet for whatever the boy or girl asks for.

That's usually very expensive. Perhaps what is so sad about Santa is not that kids are conned by a dress-up but that adults are conned by a false spirit.

You see, Christmas is better news than Santa. The spirit of Christmas is a better spirit than the spirit of Santa. Santa Claus was in the carols in the park in Manningham the other night on Friday night.

He was asked by the compere of the night, Greg Evans, what have been the most popular requests for presents this year? Dolls and robots, he said. It struck me that Santa's probably not delivered many presents in recent years.

Dolls and robots? I thought that was before I was a child. Santa has no idea. It seems to me that if we were honest with ourselves, certainly as adults, the thing that most people look for and crave for and want is love.

[3 : 47] People long to be loved. Now, many people enjoy love, a rich and deep and lasting love. But overall, our society is relatively loveless.

Relationships are all too often fractured. Love is precious and somewhat scarce. Santa's skin-deep spirit of Christmas is a bit like a game of happy families where we pretend that there's love for everybody, that there's no bitterness or resentment or selfishness, that we all got on pretty well, love for good boys and girls.

Now, certainly many of us are good people, upright citizens, morally not too bad. But are we really good? If we were to be asked the question, have you really been good this year, all year, from Boxing Day onwards, could we sincerely and honestly answer yes?

What standard are we measuring goodness by? Are we good enough for Santa's presence? Are we good enough for love, from someone else? Well, Santa might pretend, or might pretend that we're good enough, but perhaps our longings for love make us a little bit less sure.

The true spirit of Christmas is better news than the love and the spirit that Santa promotes. You see, God loves us.

[5 : 17] You and me. Every one of us, without exception. Whatever we've done, God loves us. Not a conditional love, have you been good this year?

But an unconditional love. To each and every one of us, without exception. Whoever we are, whatever we've done. That is a love for us that is despite our failings, despite our mistakes, despite our selfishness, despite our greed.

It is a love to us, despite our lack of love, in return. And God loves us, and loves us, and loves us, and loves us.

And this love, this love of God for us, will last beyond any Christmas toy. This love of God for us is more enduring than any Duracell battery. This love of God for us is more robust than any human vow.

This love of God for us is not conditional upon us being good, like Santa's toys. This love of God for us does not depend in the end on me, or us, but on God, the source of love.

[6 : 36] This love of God for us will not let us go. Ever. Hear again what the Bible says about this love of God.

God's love was revealed among us in this way. God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love.

Not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. That's what love is.

That's a better love than our society offers and a better love than Santa offers. That's the spirit of Christmas. The love of God. It's a love that God initiates.

He doesn't need to take an aphrodisiac to make him love us. He doesn't need us to be lovable and adorable in order to love us. It is a love that stems from a loving heart of God.

[7 : 41] God is the source of love, and it is a love that flows to us independently of who we are. It is pure love, free love, not dependent on us, or our love of God.

Indeed, the verses that were at the beginning of the passage in the first Bible reading finish by saying, God is love. That is, love is the essence of God.

That's what it is for God to be God, is to be loving. A love that he initiates, that he is the source of. And it's better love than we'll ever find anywhere else.

But it's also a love that cost God dearly. It's not just an emotional or sentimental feeling of God that somehow he pampers us with empty words, I love you, I love you, like sickly romantic films.

It is a love that pays a cost for us. It is a love as described here that is expressed or revealed in God sending his one and only son for us into the world.

[8 : 55] The emphasis in that verse is on a one and only son. It's not as though God's got hundreds and hundreds of children and so he can spare one or two to send down to us. The one and only son of God, the most precious thing that God the Father has, he sends to us out of love for us.

That's a love that acts. It's not sentimental and soppy. It is a real love and it's a costly love because it costs God the life of his one and only son and he's not just sending his one and only son to people who love him into a safe environment.

The word that's used for world in John's letter is always used by John with a negative or hostile connotation. That is, God sent his one and only son into enemy territory.

Imagine if you can something like George Bush sending his only child to Iraq to offer peace to them. It's beyond imagination I suspect. But that's an inkling of what God is trying to do.

Sending his one and only son into hostile territory into the world yes that God made but that by and large has turned its back on God. That's God's love, a costly love to send his son into a hostile world.

[10 : 14] It's a love that God initiates, it's a love that God pays or it's costly to God. Thirdly, it's a love that seeks our benefit. You see, God sending his one and only son into a hostile world was not to sort of make God feel good.

Sometimes our acts of love are a bit like that. That we do things because it makes us feel good. That we might give generously to some charity not out of love for the recipients but because it somehow might appease our conscience.

God doesn't love us like that. He's not sending his one and only son to us because he needs his conscience barked or something. God sends his son to us for our benefit, not his.

And what is it for our benefit? But that we may have life. Not just pedestrian life here on earth day in, day out but life with God.

Life loving God in return for the love that he expresses to us. love that has a rich relationship with our heavenly father and love, life that lasts forever, that conquers death and endures to the perfect heaven above.

[11 : 24] That's our benefit from the love that God sends us in Jesus Christ. And that is enabled by Jesus being the atoning sacrifice for our sins as that passage said in verse 10.

That is the one who pays the price for our mistakes. So we don't have to pay the price. We don't have to fix up our mess. Our failures, our sins, our lack of love for God, our lack of love for our neighbour, God deals with that.

That's the atoning sacrifice. That's why Jesus came as the act of love from God for our benefit. See, God's love for us doesn't just pretend we're all happy families.

He doesn't just sort of look at us with rose coloured glasses and thinks, oh, what a nice lot of smiling people. They're all my friends down there. I'll send Jesus to them to keep them company. Not at all. See, God knows that by and large we live our lives for ourselves, not for God.

God's realist. He knows our mistakes need to be dealt with but he deals with them himself. So God takes the initiative to love. God's love is costly because it cost his son's life.

[12 : 35] God's love for us is for our benefit not for God's. And fourthly and finally God's love lasts and lasts and lasts. Two thousand years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem God promised the people of God all sorts of things and those promises culminated two thousand years later with the birth of Jesus.

And along the way God made a number of other provinces in addition to the first ones that he made and they all culminate in Jesus being born and living and dying. That is it was God's long lasting purpose to send Jesus as an act of love for this world.

It wasn't a spur of the moment thing. It wasn't a spontaneous sort of flutter when you go and buy a bunch of flowers for your wife or for your husband because somehow it suddenly seems a good thing to do. God's love for us was planned and purposed from the beginning of time.

And my point of saying that is that it shows how enduring how durable God's love is for us. Not a spur of the moment thing two thousand years ago oh let me show them love I'll send a baby in Bethlehem.

God had worked all that out. That is his love for this world and his love for his people was something that was consistent for thousands of years before Jesus was born and continues day by day year by year century by century after Jesus died and rose from the dead.

[14 : 03] That is God's love for us endures and lasts day by day week by week month by month year by year century by century through the ages. It is a lasting love.

It will never disappoint us or fail us. God's love is faithful and keeps on keeping on. And throughout all of those two thousand years leading up to Jesus' birth the people of God were not being nice not being lovable and adorable but rather being rebellious against God.

That's the whole point of the first three quarters of the Bible the Old Testament. It shows us that the consistency and faithfulness of God's love keeps being met by deaf blind rebellious people.

But God is nonetheless faithful in his love for us and day by day in our existence the same love applies. You see God's love keeps on keeping on.

God's love is greater than our lovelessness. Our own failures mistakes or turning away from God will never thwart his love towards us and God's love for us will never disappoint us or fail us it will never run dry God's not fickle with his love he won't suddenly find someone else to go and love and scorn us or spurn us God's love is reliable and durable forever and the demonstration above all is the sending of his son Jesus to be born to live to die and to rise from the dead that's the proof of God's love to all of us without distinction whether we're good or bad it's better than Santa's conditional love it's more generous than Santa's overflowing sack it's more real than Santa's dress up pretense this indeed as the hymn writers say is love divine all loves excelling the joy of heaven to earth come down this is amazing love oh what sacrifice this is love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be this is love that will not let me go this is love come down at Christmas well poor old Santa tries hard he's much loved but really what are dolls and robots or if we updated computers and playstations today compared to the extraordinary love of God for you and me every day for eternity the gift of

[16 : 31] Jesus is the best gift we can ever receive we've ún has a been to we've