

3. The reasons for Christmas - Why did Jesus come? He came to bear witness to the Truth

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Our reading, which you'll find over the page, is taken from John's Gospel, chapter 18, verses 33 to 40.

And in a few minutes I want to speak particularly on verse 37, on the reason why Jesus came into the world, the one that he gives here in this verse. So chapter 18 and verse 33.

So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, Are you the king of the Jews?

Jesus answered, Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me? Pilate answered, Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me.

What have you done? Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews.

[1 : 05] But my kingdom is not from the world. Then Pilate said to him, So you are a king? Jesus answered, You say that I am a king?

For this purpose I was born, and for this purpose I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.

Pilate said to him, What is truth? After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, I find no guilt in him.

But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So, do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews? They cried out again, Not this man, but Barabbas.

Now Barabbas was a robber. This is the word of the Lord, and may the Lord bring his blessing to us through it. Let's bow our heads for a word of prayer.

[2 : 13] Dear God, our Father, we do long to understand the words of the Bible, and especially the words of the Lord Jesus, better. So please open our ears today. Give us ears that are ready to hear and to respond.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. I'm sure you've noticed that our passage from John's Gospel, chapter 18, contains a very clear statement from Jesus himself about why he came to the earth.

And at this time of the year, it's very good for us to ask again why he came. It's good to let the Bible guide our thinking. We need to take a rest from the mince pies and the red-nosed reindeers and so on, and ask why it was that the Lord Jesus came 2,000 years ago.

So look with me at verse 37 in our passage, halfway through the verse. Jesus is speaking to Pontius Pilate. And he says, for this purpose I was born.

Now that's a healthy looking start, isn't it? We're about to hear it from the horse's mouth, if I can put it that way. For this purpose I was born, and for this purpose I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth.

[3 : 33] I have come to tell the truth. To bear witness to it. To testify to the truth. Now that's a striking phrase, don't you think? I've come to bear witness to the truth.

There's something about that phrase, bear witness, that suggests that Jesus is seeking to persuade people. The very words, bear witness, suggest a situation which is something like a law court.

If I noticed you carrying a heavy Tesco bag as you were leaving at the end of the service, I might possibly ask you, if I was cheeky, what the bag contained. And you might say to me, well I've just bought my Christmas turkey and a net of sprouts to get ready for Christmas dinner next week.

Now you wouldn't say to me, I bear you witness that this bag contains a turkey and a net of sprouts. You wouldn't speak like that, would you? You wouldn't need to use such strong language because you wouldn't need to persuade me about something that I might be dubious about.

I would simply accept your words without question. Language about bearing witness shows that the speaker is seeking to persuade his listeners in order to secure their verdict in his favour.

[4 : 52] So the listeners are doubtful. They need arguments. They need evidence. They need testimony. So in our verse 37, Jesus is presenting testimony to a dubious and perhaps sceptical world.

I know he's speaking to Pontius Pilate here, but in a sense he's addressing the whole world. He is saying, this is my testimony to the truth, if you will believe it. And I want you to believe it.

And the world scratches its head and hums and haws and says, well we'll think about this. Now many of you, if you're Christians now, you will remember the time, maybe many years ago, when you were still unpersuaded.

And you had to consider whether Jesus' testimony to the truth was a testimony that you could accept. Now you knew that eventually you had to come down on one side or the other.

Either you would have to say, I reject all this as religious mumbo-jumbo, or you had to say, I accept this testimony. And in your case, if you're a Christian now, obviously you accepted the testimony.

[6 : 03] You said in effect to Jesus, I believe your words. I do believe that you're telling the truth.

Now if you're not a Christian, and I do hope very much that some folk here today are not believers, and we're glad to have you.

If you're not a Christian, you may never have thought that Christianity was a matter of accepting testimony. Perhaps you've thought of the Christmas story as one of those pleasant, semi-mythical tales which enrich a person's life.

More important, more culturally significant than the tale of Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf, but similar in the sense that you've got somebody good and pure and innocent, Little Red Riding Hood, or the baby Jesus, and then you have an evil monster, the wolf, or the murderous King Herod.

But try as it might, the evil power cannot succeed over the good. So the wolf nearly gets the innocent girl in that story, and Herod nearly gets the baby Jesus, but right wins out in the end, and goodness triumphs over evil.

So you've perhaps thought of the coming of Jesus in those terms, and you've enjoyed revisiting the old tale year after year. Perhaps partly because you associate it with happy childhood memories.

[7 : 22] Christmas with Granny and Cambus Lang. Maybe you also associate it with a few days off work. Everybody likes a few days off work. And a few good dinners.

A few glasses of relaxing Caledonian fluids, which make you feel very philanthropic at three o'clock in the afternoon. And you enjoy all that.

So it may be a surprise to you to see just how serious Jesus is. I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. He's requiring some kind of decision, isn't he?

Do we accept his testimony to the truth? Or do we respond like Pontius Pilate by shrugging our shoulders and saying, what is truth? He seems to be saying, truth?

I haven't got time for that kind of thing. That's for your PhD students in philosophy. I've got to get on with governing the Roman Empire. Don't talk to me about truth. There's something we need also to understand about John's Gospel.

[8 : 24] And that is that testimony, or bearing witness, is fundamental to the way in which John has written his book. This whole book of the Gospel, John's Gospel, is presented to the world as testimony to Jesus.

John's reason for writing his book is to put on a plate, under the world's nose, a whole pile of testimony to Jesus. So John accumulates one piece or one strand of evidence after another.

He gives us the testimony of John the Baptist to Jesus. He gives us the testimony of the disciples to Jesus. He gives the testimony of God the Father to Jesus, the things that the Father says about the Son.

He gives us the testimony of the Old Testament Scriptures to Jesus. He gives us the testimony of the miracles to Jesus. He gives his own testimony.

Here, John the Evangelist, who was one of the band of twelve, one of the eyewitnesses who saw the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, he testifies truly about them. And of course, he's presenting us also with a great deal of testimony to Jesus that comes from the mouth of Jesus himself.

[9 : 37] Now, why all this testimony? The answer is that John, the Evangelist, wants us to believe the truth about Jesus. And why does he want us to believe? Because he's very concerned about us. He wants us to be, at the end, not under the wrath of God, but rather to be heirs of eternal life. And he puts it like this at the very end of the book, in chapter 20. These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

So the testimony about Jesus will persuade people to believe, to accept that he is not just a, and other religious leader, but that he is the Christ, the King, the Son of God, in a unique sense. And to be thus persuaded, to believe thus, is to have life, eternal life in his name. So it's the testimony that leads to belief, and it's the belief that leads to the enjoyment of life.

Now that's why the coming of Jesus is so different from the story of Little Red Riding Hood. Little Red Riding Hood is a merry tale. We all enjoy it, especially the bit where the dead wolf is opened up and out jumps Granny as fresh as a daisy and puts the kettle on.

[10 : 53] It's a great moment, isn't it? But the history of Jesus and whether or not we accept his testimony to the truth is something upon which our eternal destiny hangs.

whether in heaven or in hell. So let me draw two points from verse 37 for us to think about. First, all of us are naturally strangers to the truth.

Now I say that because if we all knew the truth by nature, we wouldn't need Jesus to have to come to testify to the truth. He came to bear witness to the truth because it was not known.

He came to say this is the truth because he knew full well that we were all living in such a way as to turn a blind eye to it. He knew that all men and women were ignoring the truth and that ignoring it was costing them their eternal security.

He came, as it were, with a megaphone to the world to address the world. Listen to me because you need to know the truth about God. Now isn't it true that each one of us was born ignorant of God?

[12 : 06] We didn't know him. We didn't want to know him. We didn't love him. I know that some of us will have had the enormous advantage of being brought up in a Christian home by Christian parents.

But all of us, including those brought up in a Christian home, didn't naturally know God any more than we were born with a knowledge of rocket science. By nature and by birth, we neither love God nor know him, despite the fact that he's the source of our life and the giver of all our blessings. I think back to my own childhood before I heard the gospel. There were a number of things that I naturally took to and developed a strong interest in. Sport, music, chocolate cake, all the normal boyish interests.

Where do you go to smoke a cigarette without being caught? All that sort of thing. But I didn't have naturally any yearning for God. He was as far away as the emperor of Japan.

Unknowable, unknown, quite beyond the reach of a self-respecting English boy whose only aim in life was to have fun. Now, I knew that there were certain things that were true and I began to discover simple truths in mathematics and English grammar, natural history.

[13 : 26] I could tell a lion from a tiger and a Pekingese from a Jack Russell. But it never dawned upon me as a youngster that there might be such a thing as the truth, an overarching, magnificent truth who proved ultimately to be not a thing but a person and more than that, the creator of me and my family, my pets, all people, all the masses of land and all the oceans of the earth, not to mention the 11 trillion, trillion stars that constitute the universe and more than that, to be the one who came to the lost, the ignorant and the hell-bound in the form of a man, a real human being, so that at cost of his own life he might save many from a fate worse than death, so that they might no longer be under the wrath of God but should come to love God and his Son and to know God the Father and the Lord Jesus and to discover at last what it is to love and to be loved.

Jesus came to bear witness to the truth because we were all naturally ignorant of it. He came to say to us, to shout at us, will you not come to me because I am the truth.

Isn't that true that by nature and birth every one of us is a stranger to the truth? But God loves the world so much that he has brought the truth to us. He has put the truth under our noses urging us to accept it for the sake of our eternal safety.

Jesus came into the world for this very purpose, to bear witness to the truth because by nature we were all strangers to it. But then secondly, some of us will prove to belong to the truth.

Having told us in the middle of verse 37 why he has come, Jesus then adds, notice this at the end of the verse, everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.

[15:36] And what Jesus means by that is listens to my voice, recognizes me as the only saviour sent by God and then follows me. In John's gospel, the believer is described in quite a variety of ways.

What we have here in our verse 37 is just one of a number of descriptions of the Christian. But elsewhere in John's gospel, the Christian is described as someone who comes to Jesus, someone who believes in Jesus, someone who is drawn to Jesus, someone who knows Jesus, someone who abides in Jesus, someone who follows Jesus, who receives Jesus, who loves Jesus, who obeys his commands.

So in our verse 37, listening to his voice means listening and recognizing and submitting and trusting and following. It's not listening to his voice in the sense that you might listen to the voice of Pavarotti or Bing Crosby.

And we'll probably listen to the voices of Pavarotti and Bing Crosby over Christmas, won't we? we'll enjoy Nesun Dorma or I'm dreaming of a white Christmas once again.

But we shan't then love those men or follow them or obey them or live for them. But when Jesus speaks of someone listening to his voice, he is speaking about a person's whole life and orientation.

[17:05] Jesus, to the Christian, is like magnetic north to the compass needle. The Christian listens to him, acknowledges him as leader and lord, understands him, lives for him, delights in him, speaks of him, discovers that he is the truth, the overarching truth which alone makes sense of life on earth, which alone answers the question of why human beings exist and why the universe exists.

So there is something in the Christian's heart which on listening to his voice wants to rise up and run to him both to embrace him and to fall humbly at his feet.

He is everything to the believer. He is joy, he is reality, he is salvation. He is the truth and those who belong to the truth listen to his voice.

And how did Pontius Pilate respond to him? Scornfully, dismissively. What is truth? What is truth?

In just those three words, Pilate reveals that he has no interest in listening to the voice of Jesus.

He is not, in Jesus' phrase, of the truth. And right through the Bible, literally from Genesis to Revelation, there is a fundamental distinction between those who are of the truth and those who are not of the truth, those who turn aside as Pilate did.

[18:33] None of us start life on the side of truth. We are all born ignorant of God and John wrote his gospel for the world to call people from our natural ignorance to Christ who alone brings eternal life and truth and reality.

so let me ask, where do you stand? I mean each of you as an individual. Are you still treating the voice of Jesus like the voice of Bing Crosby?

Nice to listen to once or twice a year but meaningless as far as one's real life is concerned. If you are, come to Jesus because he alone bears witness to the truth.

Listen to him, hear his voice, follow him, love him. Don't be lost and hell bound and in the dark because whoever listens to his voice will be saved and rescued for all eternity.

This is why he came two thousand and seven years ago. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth.

[19:51] Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. Let's pray together. Our dear Lord Jesus, you are now enthroned and ascended on high seated beside the Father in the heavenly realms and we want to thank you again that you came to bear witness to the truth so that we might be saved.

We do pray for any here and others we know who are not Christians that you will open their ears and out of your great love for them draw them heart and soul to you so that they should find in you the truth and eternal life and we ask it for your dear name's sake.

Amen.