

Joy for the heavens - The Angel's song

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 December 2014

Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Then God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the livestock, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

So God created man in his own image. In the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. The Lord God took the man, and put him in the garden of Eden to work it, and keep it.

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, you may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.

That's a wonderful picture, isn't it, of the world as it's meant to be, and as God created it to be, the world as we would love it to be.

[1 : 31] Everything's right. There's peace, there's perfect harmony, male and female, man and nature, man and God. No wonder the next carol that we're going to sing calls us to sing praises to our creator God.

But notice when we get to the very last line of the carol, it tells another story. We praise the God who has made heaven and earth of naught, yes, but also the God who with his own blood mankind has bought.

And after the carol, the next reading, we'll begin to explain why that must be so. Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, did God actually say, you shall not eat of any tree in the garden? And the woman said to the servant, we may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.

But the serpent said to the woman, you will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you'll be like God, knowing good and evil. So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took its fruit and ate.

[3 : 08] And she also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate. The Lord God said to the serpent, because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field.

On your belly you shall go and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring.

He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel. To the woman, he said, I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing.

In pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you. And to Adam, he said, because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it.

Cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. And you shall eat the plants of the field.

[4 : 23] By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground. For out of it you were taken. For you are dust. And to dust you shall return.

A curse upon human relationships. A curse upon nature. A curse upon our very life. To dust you shall return.

That is more like the world we actually know. A world of tragedy. And of the intrusion sometimes very suddenly, very shockingly of death.

And it is all because our rebellion against God has made everything about this world wrong. And put the world in bondage to the power of sin and death.

But God's promise, even as that curse was being pronounced, was that evil would not have the last word.

[5 : 26] That God himself would intervene in history through the offspring of the woman who would at last destroy the work of the devil. And at last restore all things.

And down through human history, that promise shone despite long ages of darkness. Until at last, at the first Christmas, that offspring came.

Came to save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray. The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world and the things that have been made.

So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him. But they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened.

[6 : 53] Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Well, that does make pretty grim reading, doesn't it? People may dismiss the book of Genesis as just being ancient history or even myth, but it isn't.

[8 : 33] St. Paul there is presenting exactly the same picture, just in plainer words. And both simply describe the reality of the contemporary world that we know only too well.

How great is our world's need of saving? Saving from the darkness of our own humanity. But because of the message of Christmas, out of darkness, we have light.

And that's why even in the face of great darkness, on Christmas night, all Christians sing. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, the father of David, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples, of him shall the nations inquire.

[9 : 59] and his resting place shall be glorious. In that day the Lord with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan, the fleeing serpent, Leviathan, the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus. it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.

Be strong, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.

then shall the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

[11 : 17] If you read the prophecy of Isaiah you'll see that he was a man who saw so clearly the bitter truth of the world of humanity as it really is.

And yet that promise that he proclaimed from God was that at last sorrow and sighing shall flee away. and instead there shall be everlasting joy.

How can that be? Because of God's promise that the one who is the root of all things God himself would come himself as man as the promised Messiah as the king in David's line and come with power to bear away human sins and therefore to reverse the curse of sin.

God himself will come and make all things right and then his blessings will flow as far as the curse is found.

And so Christmas is indeed a message of joy to the world. Because of its wonderful meaning the coming of Jesus was marked by songs of great joy.

[12 : 35] As someone has said when Jesus came into the world poetry expressed itself and music was reborn. Let's listen to the familiar story of the angels and the shepherds and the message that came through them in their song.

The song of the angels to them. The song that they then carried to us and to the whole world. Luke tells us that in the same region there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night.

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them fear not for behold I bring good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord and this will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

[13 : 55] When the angel went away from them into heaven the shepherds said to one another let us go even to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us. And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and a baby lying in a manger.

And when they saw it they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary treasured up these things pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them.

Well before we think for a few minutes about what this message of the angels really means let's sing once again this lovely carol about the angels poignant message.

well angels seem to be everywhere at Christmas time don't they? So much so in fact that it can make it actually quite hard to read the Bible's accounts of angels without getting quite confused.

[15 : 12] It might be quite hard for us to understand why the shepherds seemed so terrified sore afraid as the old version says when they encountered these angels in the shepherd's fields in Bethlehem.

A few weeks ago I was in New York City visiting a friend and their church office was on Broadway just a couple of blocks up from the enormous flagship store of Victoria's Secret a lingerie store and all over that building were massive posters of Victoria's angels beautiful models with very large wings on their back and very small bits of lingerie on their fronts.

And certainly I think if a host of these angels had appeared to a bunch of men in a field there would have been indeed a strong reaction but probably a rather different reaction.

It certainly wasn't repelling people anyway from going in and out of that store and spending money. So why were these shepherds so terrified of angels?

Well the answer of course is that the Bible's idea of angels is a very very long way away from that of Victoria's secret. Indeed it's a very long way away from any of the kind of sentimental ideas of angels that we have at Christmas time on Christmas cards and decorations.

[16 : 33] The angels that these shepherds saw were in fact Luke tells us a multitude of the heavenly host. Better still we could say a multitude of the heavenly armies.

That's what the heavenly hosts are in the Bible that the armies of God. Very often the God of the Bible is called the Lord of hosts. He means the Lord of heaven's warrior armies.

And that puts a rather different complexion on things doesn't it? Grown men are not likely to be afraid of fairies with harps or little childlike cherubs and certainly not sumptuous laundry models.

But pretty tough working men, outdoor men, men like these Palestinian shepherds, they will be afraid won't they? They have a sudden appearance of a vast army full of weapons of war brandishing at them.

At least if they've got any sense at all they'll be pretty afraid. How would you feel if helicopters appeared in the sky above you as you're walking home and leaning out of them with megaphones or bristling special forces with their machine guns shouting at you with a loud hailer?

[17 : 45] Well I know how I'd feel pretty frightened. And that's what the Bible is actually talking about in that reading. In fact the reality of what the Bible is often talking about is so very different from the sentimental nonsense that we so often have in our minds at Christmas time.

We call Christmas, don't we, the season of peace and goodwill. But we know that's just make-believe. We like to pretend and we like to create the feeling of that at Christmas time and we can do it for a little while with lovely Christmas trees and lights and candles and mistletoe and wine and all of these things.

But it's just fleeting isn't it? It's not real. This year the Christmas adverts, one of them anyway, is harking back a hundred years to that extraordinary story of the trenches on Christmas day when out of the trenches came the British and the German soldiers and they played football and exchanged gifts.

Touching. But by the next day they were blowing each other's brains out again. And actually it's a bit like that at family Christmases isn't it? With little children overtired after the joy of Christmas day by boxing day they're all fighting and grumping and battering each other with their new toys.

You know it's true. It's coming. But more seriously that is our world isn't it? You know that.

[19 : 18] There's more strife and violence among families at Christmas than at any other time of year. There's more mental breakdowns, more suicides, there's more domestic trouble.

A marriage that's on the rocks is not going to be saved, is it, by an extravagant present and by a bunch of mistletoe. That's fantasy. That's sentimentality.

You see the Bible is not like that. The Bible is not sentimental. It's full of very stark realism. It faces the world as the world actually is. Far from playing let's pretend, it offers a real explanation that fits the facts as we know them to be.

That this isn't a world full of the pipes of peace. That it's a world full of violence and strife and disorder. It's not a wistful world full of gladness and laughter.

It is very often a world full of sadness and fear and pain. Now we all sense deep down, don't we, that our world should be different.

[20 : 28] That peace and joy and harmony should reign always. and that's why we dream and fantasize because we can imagine something so very different from the world as it actually is.

And we know that world does exist even if it's only within the potentiality of our own minds and our hearts. But if we're realists, we know that the world actually is as it is.

And we just can't pretend it away. And that is the basic perplexity, isn't it, at the root of so much of our human angst. That's why we ask these questions. Why?

Why is there such violence and hatred and war? Why are there terrible things like that school shooting in Pakistan just last week? Why can't so many families live in peace?

Why does that child have leukemia? Or that friend have a brain tumor? Or why can a terrible tragic accident happen in George Square at Christmas time?

[21 : 40] The Bible will not play let's pretend. Let's pretend the world is all lovely and pain free and nothing but laughter. The Bible tells the truth.

The Bible says this world is in a mess. And it explains why it's in a mess. And it points us not to a let's pretend solution, but it points us to the real solution.

That we're in the mess that we're in as human beings because we are in a long-running civil war. We know what civil war means. We've seen it in Afghanistan, in Syria, in other places.

But the Bible tells us that the whole world is in a civil war with its maker. That human beings have rebelled unilaterally against God.

That we've banished God from the world stage. That we've shut out the glory of God from our human world. And that's what the Apostle Paul says plainly in that letter to the Romans that we read.

[22 : 47] Although they knew God, they did not acknowledge him as God, and so they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

That's the Bible's diagnosis of our world. We've shut God out. And so God has turned his benevolent face away from us.

God gave human beings up, says the Apostle, to dishonorable passions and debased minds. And that's why we inhabit a world filled with all these things.

Well, look, envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. People are boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Not much sentimental fantasy there, is there? What it describes, very accurately, is the panoply of disordered relationships in our world, on a personal level, on community levels, on international levels.

[23 : 53] But it all comes back to the one root cause, which is a disordered relationship with God, our maker. And human beings are responsible because we are without excuses, Paul.

We've turned away. But it's God who has done it. God has given the world over to the vanity and to the power of human beings.

We want to run the world. And God says, all right. And this is the world that we've made for ourselves. We've made a thorough job, I think, of wrecking this world.

But the problem is we can't fix it. Politicians can't fix it, that's for sure. The police can't fix it, or our courts. No amount of laws can sort out the world.

Laws certainly can help restrain evil, but they cannot reverse evil, can they? Now, only an act of God himself can begin to put this world to rights.

[25 : 00] Only a divine intervention can sort out the primary problem, which is our relationship with God himself. God will have to see, in the coming of Jesus Christ into the world, that is what has begun.

That's what this extraordinary heavenly army are announcing to these terrified shepherds. The birth of Jesus, they say, is good news of great joy.

It is wonderful news for the people of this dark and broken world. It's quite amazing, really, when you think about it, that an event that passed almost unnoticed on earth set the whole of the heavens ablaze with joy and singing.

It's just worth looking at this angel's song a little bit to see what the song of these fearsome heavenly soldiers was really saying to our world. First thing it does is that it proclaimed real rejoicing in heaven.

Above all, it is a message of glory to God in the highest. What they're saying is that God himself has acted to bring himself into the center of our world forever.

[26 : 14] So that he again has the preeminence in all things. The Christian message is first and foremost about God. It's about him being vindicated in the eyes of the world and being seen to be the God of glory who he is.

It's very important to understand that. Christianity is not first and foremost about human beings. It's not a crutch for feeble people who need something to believe in otherwise they'll never get through life.

Quite the reverse. It's about God. It's about the true God and the only God showing himself to be the God of glory and showing himself to be that to a world that has rejected him and far more importantly which he has therefore distanced himself from because of that rebellion.

The message of Christmas is good news because it's the message about God coming back into the center of this world story and not leaving it in all its own disaster.

It's quite ironic really because these days it seems that Christ is almost completely airbrushed out of Christmas. People might complain about that but notice the angels are not complaining about that.

[27 : 30] The angels are not having a plea saying please please would you put God back into Christmas. Far from it. They are proclaiming a fact that God's own action is putting himself right into the heart of his world.

He has done it even if no one else sees it even if no one else notices but a few shepherds. God has glorified himself in the highest and all heaven sees it and all heaven is singing about it.

And they sing friends because they see something that we don't see. They see that what the birth of Jesus really means for this world is that there will be at last real reconciliation on earth.

That's why there's real rejoicing in heaven. There's peace shout this warrior army of angels. Peace among those with whom God is well pleased.

That's nothing to do with seasonal bonhomie and mulled wine and mince pies. Although we do like those and there'll be some afterwards so do stay. But this is the real peace that follows only when God has got his rightful place in this world and with its people when he is Lord over all his people. [28 : 48] people. You see for an estranged people who are in revolt against God that kind of peace must follow a real reconciliation, a real cessation of hostilities.

You know how hard real reconciliation is when there's been a real crime, when there's been a real injustice. It's the hardest thing in this world because injustice can't just be brushed away, can it? We can't just say let's pretend. Let's pretend my house wasn't robbed and ransacked. Let's pretend I wasn't raped and beaten up. Let's pretend I wasn't cheated on by you in our marriage. We can't do that, can we? It's not real. Now there's a huge cost for reconciliation to be real and to happen.

A real cost, we know that. Sometimes it's so very, very hard to forgive someone for something that they have done to us that we can never really do it. And a relationship is poisoned forever.

[30 : 03] We know that. You see, God is the wronged party in every way in our world. Therefore, only God can bear the cost of that forgiveness and reconciliation.

And yet the angelic message is precisely that. God is now the great reconciler. He comes as Savior. He comes to bring reconciliation.

For unto you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And that's what Jesus' birth means. God said through the prophet Isaiah, I am the Lord.

Beside me there is no Savior, no reconciler. Only God can sort out this world's mess. And yet these heavenly warriors are singing.

Now, in the birth of the long-promised Christ, the Messiah, the King in David's line, God himself has come to be the great Savior. Savior. In the human flesh of Jesus Christ, he has come to make peace between God and man, to bring real reconciliation.

[31 : 18] And yes, there was a cost, a great cost, a terrible cost, because justice cannot just be ignored, because sin must be punished if there is to be justice at the heart of this universe.

others. But he was born to bring peace by making peace. As St. Paul says later on, making peace through the blood of his cross.

God himself came in human flesh to bear the awful consequences of human sin himself, so that he might reconcile rebellious human beings to himself in love.

And that's why the angels are singing of joy and of great glory. Even they marvel at what God is doing. God's mighty heavenly army, the heavenly host, is looking on in wonderment, in bewilderment, that God himself could do this for rebellious human beings.

That instead of calling these armies to come down and destroy mankind, God himself is entering his own world to give his own life to reconcile those who are his enemies.

[32 : 39] What kind of God is that? Well, clearly it's not the God of suicide bombers, is it? Not the dreadful God, but the wonderful God of the Bible.

God, the only God, the living God, the God who created this world and the God who so loved this world that he gave his only son that there might be real and true reconciliation through real forgiveness of rebellious human beings.

God's love. And friends, that's why the message of the angels is a wonderful one. That's also why it's a message which cannot be ignored.

Not by the shepherds then, but not by anyone ever because it is so vast. It is so magnificent. It's the greatest revelation of God there can ever be on this earth.

And therefore, to ignore it would be such a monumental refusal of reality that it could only lead to total disaster.

[33 : 54] There is real rejoicing in heaven because God the Savior has come. And there is real reconciliation on earth through Jesus Christ, costly and terrible but wonderful.

And so there must be, there must be a real response. A real response in time and history for all to whom this message is sent.

God sends his message of peace for a response from human beings. There can't be peace, can there, for those who refuse peace and will not have it.

Peace has to be accepted. Reconciliation has to be entered into to be real. We know that, don't we? There's no reconciliation in theory.

Reconciliation is about re-entering a relationship that is real and restored and renewed. Can't be any other way, can it?

[34 : 59] And so it is with God's peace. God is gracious. God is merciful. God is merciful. But he's not soft. He's not sentimental. He's certainly not unjust.

He offers his peace, but his peace must be received and must be welcomed. And his peace is for those with whom he is well pleased.

Not because they're better people who've earned his peace, but because they are humble people who are willing to receive his gracious peace and favor.

To respond in obedient faith to God's marvelous reconciling work in Jesus Christ, his Son. See, the message of Christmas, the message of Jesus Christ calls for a response.

It calls for a personal response, an urgent response, before it's too late. I said that the angels' words were prophetic, and they still are, because the peace of which they speak will one day fill this entire earth.

[36 : 09] When the people of Christ inherit this whole earth. One day Jesus shall return, and he will reign, and he will establish his cosmic peace in this universe forever, forever.

But you see, friends, on that day he will not be offering peace. On that day he will be establishing peace with the force of his judgment.

He shall judge the nation, said the prophet, and they will beat their swords into plowshares and their shields into pruning hooks. See, that's another verse that so often sentimentalizes the way into nothing more than just Bonahami and the brotherhood of man.

But friends, that verse is not talking about that. It is talking about the abject surrender of every power in this world before the power of Christ, the King of glory, when he returns to judge this entire world.

And that day is coming, according to the Bible. But on that day it will be too late, you see, because it will be too late to respond and to find peace.

[37 : 22] It's like the end game of a siege with an armed gunman. There's a time, isn't there? And we saw it in Sydney last week, tragically. There's a time when the officer in charge offers peace, peace for those who will surrender and throw down their weapons and give up their opposition.

But there comes a time, doesn't there, when the tear gas goes in and the armed assault takes place.

And the time for surrender has passed then. It's too late. And friends, that is why Luke wrote this gospel for us that we've read tonight.

There is a message to bring real rejoicing, a message about real reconciliation. But it is a message that demands real response now, before it's too late.

Look at how the shepherds themselves responded when they heard the news. Because Luke is saying to us in this story, look what they did and do as they did. Because they got it right.

[38 : 35] What did they do? Well, they came personally. Let us go, they said. They were humble enough to respond, to know that they needed the message of reconciliation.

They needed the Savior. Many people don't think they need it. I don't need that stuff. I don't need that religion stuff. Friends, if that's what you think, you had better be very, very sure, hadn't you? That the Bible is totally and completely wrong. That Jesus is just a complete fraud. The shepherds didn't take that risk.

They came personally. And you see, they came urgently. They came with haste. Not putting it off. That's another stumbling block that so many people have. Oh, there's plenty of time for all of that when I'm older.

You'd better be very, very sure of that too, hadn't you? When I worked as a doctor many times, I wrote death certificates for people younger than myself, and that was a long time ago.

[39 : 40] No one in George Square the other day had the remotest thought that death was just an instant away, did they? The Christian message is a message from God, from heaven itself.

a message to bring real rejoicing because it is good news about real reconciliation of man with God, of heaven and earth through Jesus Christ our Lord.

But friends, let me say to you, with the greatest seriousness this Christmas, it's a message for receiving, not for rejecting.

When you do receive it, you will discover, just as the shepherds did, that everything you find in Jesus Christ is just as it has been told you by these angels.

There's no fantasy, there's no let's pretend with the God of the Bible. Only truth, reality. and great, great joy.

[40 : 55] So will you join the joy of heaven this Christmas? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, how we thank you for the great reconciliation that you offer to us in your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who came into this darkness that we might have the light of life, draw near to us and to everyone in this city conscious, perhaps more than ever this year, of the darkness and the fear of death.

And may we find in the message of Christ the light that banishes all fear and the life that will leave death behind forever.

Amen. But as we close this evening, let's pray. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of his Holy Spirit be with you all now and always.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.