

The Mighty God Who works powerful liberation for all the oppressed

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[0 : 01] It's never been the story of Christmas alone, enchanting as it is, that makes people want to sing because these lovely carols were written by people who understood what the birth of Jesus Christ really means.

Our final reading now takes us back again to the words of Isaiah the prophet, speaking in around 734 BC. Listen again as he tells people what to expect of this miraculous child that God promised would come in answer to the prayers and the longings of the human heart and in answer to the darkness of our human world.

He says this, The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

We heard in one of those readings about old Simeon who was waiting for the consolation of Israel, something that he then saw wonderfully fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.

But what child is this? Who was he waiting for? What was he waiting for? Well, he was waiting for the one promised by the prophets of old, not least Isaiah.

[2 : 13] Speaking, as we said, way back in the 8th century BC, who promised that this birth would be one of ultimate answer from God to all the hopes of humanity right throughout history.

Israel's history. Israel's history was long. And Isaiah's prophecy is a very long one. But that well-known verse that I read is very famous from Handel's Messiah, I suppose.

And it helps us to see what it is that these people, like Simeon, were waiting for. Last Sunday evening at our festival of Christmas, we looked at the first name in Isaiah's list there, the wonderful counselor.

He would be one who counsels, who purposes wonders for his people. That is the wonders of his salvation. He'll be the true, the permanent leader of all mankind, leading all who bow the knee to him into the wonders of God's everlasting peace.

But tonight I want to think about this second name. Because this human child, who is the answer to all of his people's longings, his name, says Isaiah, will be called, do you see, the mighty God.

[3 : 28] And that means that he will have power to be at last, a powerful liberator of all the oppressed this world over. But this child himself, says Isaiah, will be nothing less than God Almighty.

God come to bring his redemption, his liberation, powerfully, into this world forever. To all of those who have been walking in darkness, in distress, in the gloom of anguish.

True liberation from the darkness of death itself. And into the light of life. Life eternal, as God meant it to be.

So I want us to focus on three things, really, that I think we need to understand about what this name implies. And here's the first. This child is himself Almighty God. He is the Lord.

Lord. The Nicene Creed says of Jesus Christ that he is God of God. Light of light. Very God of very God.

[4 : 31] Begotten, not created. Being of one substance with the Father. By whom all things were made. And who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven.

And was incarnate, enfleshed, by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary. And was made man. Now that statement is the mark of Orthodox Christian faith.

No Mormon, no Jehovah's Witness, no Christian scientist, no Christadelphian can say those things. Nor, of course, could any Muslim or any Jewish person. But the Bible says so clearly, and we've read it, that this child would be called the mighty God.

Now people make attempts to explain it away. But in all honesty, if you can read those words in Isaiah 9. And think that whatever Isaiah is talking about here is not something of staggering proportion.

Something clearly supernatural. Well, I don't know what to say. Even if you think that such a thing is impossible. Surely you recognize that Isaiah, at least, is talking in those terms.

[5 : 45] And the word God that Isaiah uses there is only ever used of God the Lord. The God of Israel throughout his prophecy. Never refers to anyone else. In fact, the only time in the very next chapter that the exact phrase is used.

The mighty God. It's used unequivocally of God himself. The Holy One of Israel. This Christ will be himself almighty God. He's the Lord. He's the Holy One of Israel.

And so all those years later, when the angel tells Mary that she'll give birth in an utterly miraculous way as a virgin. To the one who will be great.

Who will be called the Son of the Most High. Who will rule on David's throne forever. Whose kingdom will never ever end. There is no doubt at all.

What this child Jesus is to be. As the angel says to Mary, nothing is impossible with God. He is the Christ.

[6 : 46] He is the Lord. He is God almighty come in the flesh. And if you read through the gospels. You can't miss the absolute clarity that Jesus himself had on his own identity.

It's extraordinary when people can say, I think, oh Jesus. Jesus never really claimed divinity for himself. Utterly extraordinary if you've ever actually read the gospels. And by the way, if you haven't, there's Luke's gospels at the back.

And do take one tonight. Read it for yourself. See for yourself. Jesus constantly acted as one who had all the authority of the mighty God. He spoke quite clearly of his oneness with the Father.

He definitively interpreted the words of God's holy law with an authority that only God alone could give. He himself forgave people's sins.

Something that only God could ever do. And of course, that was why the religious leaders of Israel hated him. We're going to stone you for blasphemy, he said. Because you, being a man, claim to be God.

[7 : 49] He ought to die, they shouted to Pilate. Why? Because he claimed to be the son of God. So the answer is unequivocal.

In this child, God became man. And that is the heart of the Christian faith. St. Paul says, great indeed is the mystery.

God was manifest in the flesh. He, this child, is the image of the invisible God. For in him, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, says the apostle.

And that is what some of the carols that we've been singing speak of so magnificently. Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see. Hail the incarnate deity.

Behold, the great creator makes himself a house of clay. A robe of human form he takes forever from this day.

[8 : 55] What child is this? He is the mighty God. He is the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. He's the one who cancels wonders, who purposes wonders.

But as the mighty God, he is the one who is powerful to accomplish all that he purposes. And what he purposes above all is redemption for his people.

And so secondly, this child will be the Lord. He will be the Lord, mighty to save, the liberator of all mankind. He's the God whose very name speaks of him as a mighty redeemer, as a liberator.

Listen to what another prophet, Jeremiah, says of him. O great and mighty God, whose name is the Lord of hosts, great in counsel, mighty indeed. You have shown signs and wonders in the land of Egypt and to this day in Israel and among mankind, and have made a name for yourself.

You see how God gets his name, he gets his renown from the wonders that he did. Above all, in Egypt to rescue his people in the Exodus. That is the great liberation of God's people out of bondage, out of slavery, and into the land of God's promise.

[10 : 17] And where God redeemed his people, he liberated them by his mighty hand, the mighty hand of the mighty God. And the language of the mighty God surrounds that whole story of the great liberation.

In Exodus chapter 3, at the burning bush, God speaks to Moses and says, Go, the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt

with all the wonders that I will do in it.

And after that, he will let you go. Liberated by the mighty hand of the mighty God. And that's why forever after, Israel's commanded to tell their children about God, the mighty liberator.

We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but he brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And so it will be forever in the future, Moses told his people.

You shall remember what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt. The signs, the wonders, the mighty hand by which the Lord brought you out. And you shall not be afraid.

[11 : 25] For the Lord your God is in your midst, a great and awesome God. A mighty God who liberates his people.

And that's what this child will be for all my people, promises Isaiah. He will be Emmanuel. He'll be God with you. A mighty God in the midst to save, to redeem, to liberate you.

And to liberate you forever. This is going to be something far, far greater, he's saying, than the liberation from Egypt. It won't just be a temporary thing, an earthly thing.

It will be forever. And this liberation will be something that brings redemption to all peoples. In fact, to the whole creation. Near the end of his prophecy, we heard some of those words where Isaiah says it will be a liberation from the darkness that covers the whole earth.

The thick darkness that shrouds all peoples. But a day is coming, he says. And it's the day this child will bring that he's speaking about.

[12 : 32] A day is coming when the glory of the Lord will arise upon Israel and all nations will come to that light. A day when kings will come, he says, to the brightness of your rising.

Bearing gold and frankincense. And bearing good news, not only for Israel, but for all the nations and all peoples. And in that day, says the Lord, you shall know that I, the Lord, am your Savior and your Redeemer, your Liberator, the Mighty One of Jacob.

I am the Lord. In its time, I will hasten it. Who is this child to come? He's the Lord. He is the Liberator.

The Redeemer. But a Liberator from what? What is this bondage that Isaiah is talking about? What's the liberation all about?

And what's any of that got to do with us? Nearly 3,000 years after Isaiah wrote these words. 2,000 years after the birth of Jesus. Well, that's the third thing that I want to try and make clear.

[13 : 43] That this child is the Liberator from death itself. Forever. He is the life giver. From depths of hell, your people save.

And give them victory over the grave, we sang. Now maybe you're thinking to yourself, I don't know what you're talking about. I don't need to be liberated.

I'm free. I'm in control of my own life. I'm in control of my body. I'm in control of my future. I make my choices in life. I don't need any of this liberation stuff. And maybe you're feeling indignant about what I'm saying.

Perhaps you're sitting there saying, well, how dare you say I'm in bondage? How dare you say I'm in darkness? That's offensive. Well, at the risk of being thought even more offensive, I'm just going to ask if you would hear me out for a few more minutes.

And let me put my cards on the table. I'm going to be blunt. I'm not going to hide anything. Here's the reality. The Bible does say, friends, that if you don't know Jesus Christ personally as your liberator, as your redeemer, then yes, you are in darkness.

[14 : 59] You are in bondage. Jesus says you're a slave. You're a slave to the power of sin. And ultimately, a slave to the author of sin, the devil himself.

Now, I know that sounds very offensive. But the truth is, that's just the language that Jesus himself used all the time. If you can try not to get angry, and just think for a moment, who is right?

Not who's being polite, or who's being offensive, but who's actually talking about the truth here?

Jesus? Or those of us who want to claim that we're free, that we're autonomous, we're in control, we're masters of our own destiny, we don't need liberation.

That's the question. Who's telling the truth? You see, I think, I don't know what you think, but I think it is possible to be enslaved, and to need liberation, and yet not to actually know it.

Perhaps because you've never really known what it is, to be free. You've never known anything else. I wonder about countries like North Korea today, for example, where people have lived for generations, never knowing real freedom.

[16:13] Certainly not in political terms, in the way that we do. I wonder if they understand just how much in bondage they are. I think you see that many people today in our culture think that they're very free.

They can do as they please. We've got money. We've got freedom of speech. At least the Prime Minister tells us we have. We can travel. We can do things. We're able to do as we please.

But here's the question. Are we, do you think, really quite so free? Are we as liberated in our own society? See, I'm not so sure, because if we were, why should we be surrounded by so much dissatisfaction about what we have and about what we think we need?

Why do we have soaring rates of unhappiness and depression, even in children, young kids? Why do we have so many relational breakups, marriage breakups, family disharmony?

Why is psychological ill health the commonest cause of being signed off work today and rocketing?

[17:26] Why are there all these things if we're so free? Why are artists still striving to express a sense of needing to break free?

Not just as Freddie Mercury sang, but artists are constantly doing that, aren't they? They're wanting to be free from conventions, free from a sense of being stifled, searching for more, rebelling against the things that they do know and they do experience and looking for something else.

Why is there all of that if we are so free, if we're so autonomous, if we're so much in control of our lives the way we want them to be? Perhaps, perhaps many of us are actually willing slaves a lot of the time to the harsh powers, to the taskmasters of this world that actually we are constantly buying down to serve, striving to please what the world demands from you, seeking the wealth perhaps for you that would give you some kudos, or the career maybe, or the education that would gain admiration for you, or the relationship that will give you identity in life, or the perceived gender these days that will satisfy your desire for identity.

For some people, it's just the achievements that will gain their parents' approval. That's such a common thing. There's so many ways, aren't there, of which we find ourselves living for our masters.

Because somehow, at last, these things will give us the satisfaction that we crave. But you see, if we're living like that, then it does mean, doesn't it, that we really are living under a power that ultimately controls us.

[19:10] And the tragedy is, friends, that these masters, and I think we know it, they don't have the power to liberate our lives. But they do have the power very often, don't they, to condemn us as failures.

And we don't achieve all the things we'd hoped to achieve. So I'm not sure that our claim to real liberty actually will stand the test of scrutiny. But in any case, there is one indisputable fact that I think we'll all have to conclude is true, even if we may feel offended by some of the things I've said. The fact that we are in bondage and in darkness. And that is that we're in bondage to death. And death is a fact.

Writing to the Christians in Rome, the Apostle Paul likens the bondage of humanity to the power of sin to being under the overlordship of a brutal employer who abuses his workers.

And in the end, adds insult to injury by paying them a final wage. And that wage is death. The wages of sin is death.

[20:24] And we can't deny that fact, can we? Cosmetics industry, of course. The medical profession helps us to try and avoid it and hide from it for a while. But not forever.

However free we might think we are, every one of us will receive that final paycheck, won't we? And a very bitter wage it is.

And it's a wage that spoils even our joyful times. Especially times like Christmas. Casts a dark shadow, doesn't it, long over our lives.

We even use that language of the Bible of death's dark shadow. Christmas will be under a shadow this year, we say. If there's been a bereavement during the year. And that will be so.

I know it's so for some of us in this room. Yes, the fact that death does make us all, all, people who are walking in darkness, all the days of our lives in this world, it's indisputable.

[21:29] We are those who are walking in the land of the shadow of death. But you see, the message of Christmas, the message of the Christian gospel is that this child who is the Lord, who is the mighty God, the true liberator, is the liberator from nothing less than death itself.

He is the life giver. And with His coming, therefore, the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. There is no greater light than the light of life that conquers death, that destroys death forever.

And that liberates people, therefore, from the shadow of death, both now and forever. In Jesus, says the apostle, God Himself took flesh and blood that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver, liberate, all those who, through fear of death, were subject to lifelong slavery.

And that is right at the heart of Isaiah's promise for this child. He will be the Lord, the true liberator, the life giver, mighty to deliver from the greatest tyrant of all, death itself.

And He will do so forever. Listen to what He says in chapter 25 of His prophecy. All about when His wonders, counseled from of old, at last come to fulfillment.

[23 : 02] He will swallow up death forever. And the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces. And He goes on to say, Your dead shall live.

Their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust awake and sing for joy. For your dew is a dew of light. And the earth will give birth to the dead.

Do you see? He really is going to disperse the gloomy clouds of night. Put death's dark shadows to flight forever. And that's what this child, He said, would do.

He would liberate. He would rescue forever those who are trapped in the powerlessness of their own mortality. Those who are helpless, as we all are, under the curse because of the guilt of our sins.

And something we could never do, something no mortal could ever do, Jesus Christ can do. Why? Because, and only because, He Himself is the mighty God.

[24 : 08] The One who's mighty arm works salvation for His people. And because, as a humble human servant, this child would come to bear that curse for His people.

And bearing our sins away, receiving the wage of death for our sins Himself on the cross, to loose sinners from the claims of hell.

and to liberate them instead from the gate of heaven. The Apostle Paul puts it this way. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son in whom we have redemption, true liberation, the forgiveness of our sins.

And so, we are truly liberated in Jesus Christ. No guilt in life. And no fear, therefore, in death.

Only life. Eternal life. Life as God created it to be for human beings. In a place where He'll swallow up death forever and the Lord will wipe away all tears from all faces.

[25 : 22] You know, friends, there are people that I know, in fact, some of them, I guess, will be here tonight who know that it's very likely that they'll not see another Christmas after this year.

But they are liberated from the fear of death because they have found in Jesus Christ the light of life. What child is this?

He is the mighty God. He is Emmanuel. He is God with us to redeem. He is the Lord. He is the liberator. He is the life giver to all who will come to Him and receive the life that He offers to all who trust in Him.

He was born to die so that we might be born again. Never to die. But to live in the liberty of the Son of God, our great risen Savior.

That's what these carols are all about. That's what the message of Christmas is all about. That's what the Christian faith is all about. Christ, the mighty God who brings us eternal life.

[26 : 39] Amen. Let's pray. Oh, come. Come to Jesus Christ, the life giver, all you faithful. Come and behold Him, born the King of angels.

Come, let us adore Him. Christ, the Lord, the mighty God. Gracious God, grant us, we pray, that this will indeed be the response of all of our hearts this Christmas time.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen.