

To Be Seen

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[0 : 00] Okay, good morning, everyone. Good morning. Morning, where the front row are awake and in. Lovely to see you today. My name is Graeme. I'm the pastor here of the church. Boys and girls, didn't you do well?

Well done. It's amazing. I had a great view from the side. You're out of your costumes now. So here's what I'd love to do. The spotlight has been this morning on a younger generation. And here's what I'd love to do just for a few minutes, okay? I would love to shine the spotlight on an older generation. So put your hand up, and you better believe I'm about to ask this question, right? Put your hand up if you're over 65 here this morning for the boys and girls to see. Right, boys and girls, have a look around. See how many people are over 65? Quite a number.

Get those hands in the air where we can see them. Boys and girls, here, you can put them down now. Here is why I would have loved to be around when this generation were growing up, okay?

[1 : 02] Because they witnessed the first ever human being going into space, which I think would be a pretty cool thing to witness. In fact, here he is, a Russian man by the name of Yuri Gagarin, the first human being to go into space.

Imagine seeing that live. Imagine being around when that happened. Yuri Gagarin goes into space, and here's what he says when he got up there. He said, I looked and I looked, but I didn't see God. Now, whoever you are here today, maybe this is your first time in church for years. Maybe you come here every week. Here's the question for every single one of us here today. What do you make of his logic? You see, many people heard Yuri Gagarin say that, and for them it just confirms the make-believe nature of Christianity.

We refer in our culture, don't we, to the big man upstairs. And for them, this just confirmed it like the Wizard of Oz. There was nobody behind the curtain. So Yuri Gagarin says this, the world reacts. But there was another man who reacted to this. His name was C.S. Lewis. And he heard Yuri Gagarin say this line, and he responded by writing an essay called The Seeing Eye.

[2 : 17] If you Google it, you'll find it. And in it, he critiqued the logic that Yuri Gagarin was using. Because what Lewis said is if human beings are to understand and ever meet God, we have to appreciate that it's not like a skyscraper.

Human beings live on the ground floor, God lives on the top floor, and all it is is just an elevator ride to go and meet him. Don't think elevator, said C.S. Lewis.

We've got to think Shakespeare, the great English playwright from the 1600s. Here was the question. How could Hamlet, who was one of the characters in Shakespeare's plays, how could Hamlet ever hope to meet Shakespeare?

What do you think? The only way, said C.S. Lewis, is if Shakespeare wrote himself into Hamlet's world. Now, he did say that in the 60s, so let me try and modernize it for us.

How would the Gruffalo ever hope to meet Julia Donaldson? How could Hermione Granger and J.K. Rowling, how could their paths ever cross?

[3 : 32] How could Rebus, and the old one is way much better than the new one if you're looking at that picture, How could Rebus ever hope to look Ian Rankin in the eye? The only chance of characters, of creatures ever meeting the author is if the author wrote himself into the story.

Or as Lewis put it, Hamlet could initiate nothing for the two to ever meet. It must be Shakespeare's doing. So Lewis is saying that the issue is not distance.

The issue is nature. And that's the logic, if you want to track with the verses that John uses here, when he tries to help human beings understand the significance of what he's witnessed.

That's the logic he uses. He talks about, do you see it on the screen, the true light, as opposed to all the false dawns that have risen throughout history. He says that true light has come into the world.

The light that gives light to everything is here. That's what he means. He means God, the creator of all things, was writing himself into the human story as the person of Jesus is born.

[4 : 47] No wonder the darkness, verse 4, cannot understand it, cannot fathom it, because this event is as unique as it gets in human history.

That's the wonder of Christmas. God writing himself into humanity's story. Now, here's two points I've got for us this morning over the next 10, 15 minutes. John tells us two things are true about the coming of Jesus into the world.

And here's the first one. John is telling us that it highlights a tragedy. Because how would the world respond to the coming of its creator?

To see or not to see? That's the question, right? There's two groups of people, if you've got the Bible there in front of you, two groups of people in John's minds. First, he goes broad and he talks about the world, the whole world.

The Greek word there is cosmos. This is the world that God created. How would the world respond to the coming of Jesus? The tragedy is even though the world was made through Jesus, the world did not know him.

[5 : 54] The baby born in Bethlehem, born into poverty, born into scandal, did not even register on the world's radar. The world did not know him.

And secondly, he goes narrow to God's own people, the Jewish people. If ever there was a people who should have got it, it was them.

The Old Testament, they had it there. All the pieces of the jigsaw as to the Messiah, his person, his birth. They're right there in front of them.

And yet they did not receive him. Because they're looking for a Messiah who was much more of a political leader. Remember the world that John is writing into, Roman occupied.

God's people, they don't want a saviour. They want a saviour who is a political leader, who's going to banish the Romans and win their freedom. So the world did not want Jesus.

[6 : 51] His own did not want Jesus. There's the tragedy. The creator came and the creature did not want to know. Why? Well, really it boils down to what his coming tells us about us.

Now some of you might know that Ronald Reagan, the 40th president of the United States, jobs previous to his presidency, he was once upon a time a lifeguard.

There's a factoid if you're looking for one this morning. Once upon a time a lifeguard. It was reported that in his time he saved, get this, 77 people from drowning.

It's very specific, that number, isn't it? Which probably tells you it's pretty accurate. 77 people he's saved from drowning. And somebody once asked Mr. Reagan, Mr. Reagan, what was the emotion that you most encountered from people when you were trying to save them?

What he said was really interesting. He said the emotion I most encountered was anger. Anger because most people were in denial in the moment that they needed rescued.

[8 : 00] Friends, the message of Christmas is not flattering to us. God did not send Jesus to congratulate mankind on how well we're doing.

He did not send Jesus to fist pump us for our achievements. He did not send Jesus as a scout to learn a few things from us as to how to do life in this world.

The coming of Jesus spotlights the mess that we've made and the mess that we're in. Here's the thing. God knew exactly what he was doing when he sent Jesus.

And the clues in the name. You ever thought about it? Mary and Joseph denied the privilege of naming their son. The angel said, you are to call him Jesus.

The Greek form of that Hebrew name Joshua, that name meaning God saves. Here is this man, this carpenter from Nazareth, walking around and his name literally means God saves.

[9 : 02] That's his job description. That in the eyes of our creator is our greatest problem.

Christmas confronts us with that truth. As someone once said, and I've heard this so many times, attributed to so many people, so I don't even know who said it, but it's a cracker.

If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist.

If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. But since our greatest need was forgiveness, God sent us a savior. Now that's a hard pill to swallow.

Maybe it's the first time you've ever heard that kind of stuff. But I remember really wrestling with that when I was first thinking about the Christian faith. When I grappled with Jesus, when I encountered

him telling me that my greatest problem was not the one that was out there.

The greatest problem in my life was the one that existed in here. But the thing is, the more that I opened up myself to Jesus, I found him to be bang on the money.

[10:11] The world that he was sketching out for me was the one that I knew was true deep down and was the one that I looked out and saw. No personality test required.

No health check-up questionnaire. Dr. Jesus came into my life and he perfectly diagnosed me. And yet here he was, not with fists of condemnation.

Here he was with arms of outstretched love, willing to save me. And it occurred to me in that moment, by extension, if I can trust Jesus, that he knows what he's talking about when it comes to me, what's wrong with me and what's wrong with the world, then I can trust Jesus for what he says is true about him.

And that's the great news that the word but, if you've got it there, verse 12, invites us to see. It's a change of direction, that word. It's a change in reaction it's been looking for.

Do you see it? What does the coming of Jesus tell us? It tells us that we need saving. It's spotlights, a tragedy. But the second thing it tells us is that it presents an opportunity.

[11:32] You know, I've lost count of how many times I've heard that Andy Williams song. You know the one? Again, older generation. It's the most wonderful time of the year. They don't make album covers like that anymore, do they?

That is an absolute cracker. But it's funny, isn't it, that we almost instinctively, every single one of us at this time of year at Christmas, know that the emotions that we should be looking for and experiencing are joy, peace, and love.

These are the things that we long to feel. There's something about this season which stirs that within each one of us. And yet the irony is, I hear that song in Cameron Toll, and the backdrop to it is normally a shopping centre full of stressed out and burned out people who are fighting cues.

And we feel that pressure to have to almost manufacture happiness at this time of year. When in actual fact, for so many of us here this morning, I know that it really is the most painful time of the year.

And that worry and that weariness combines to mean that we feel anything other faithful, joyful, and triumphant, as the hymn puts it.

[12:45] And the amazing thing is that John moves us from telling those about those who didn't receive Jesus to begin to tell us about those who did. Now, this stage, we don't know who they are, but if you read on in this gospel account that John, the eyewitness of all of these things, has put together so that his generation and generations beyond would read, pick up, see, and believe in Jesus, you read on in this gospel and you will find a really surprising list.

Not the rich and famous, not the religious and impressive, but those who turn to and trust Jesus, having come to the end of themselves, knowing that they have nothing to offer and nowhere else to run other than to him.

People who meet Jesus and truly his name is the sweetest to be around. People who encounter Jesus and truly his company is the best company to be in because he offers people everything to meet their greatest problem.

And he has done everything to begin to put them together back again. You read on for this woman who's become an outcast in her Samaritan village because she's had a string of failed relationships. Her life is in tatters. Jesus coming is really good news for her. For the woman who's been caught in adultery.

[14:16] Again, her life is in tatters. The coming of Jesus is good news for her. For this man who's born blind, who spends his life begging, the coming of Jesus is good news for him.

For two sisters who are there grieving over the death of their brother, the coming of Jesus is good news for them. And it's good news because Jesus comes to offer himself to be the solution to the greatest need that any of us have.

And he's come to be the balm for the deepest wounds that any of us will suffer. And John says to all who did receive him. And that word is wide.

All. He gave the right to become children of God. Now, before we get into what it means to believe in his name, see what John is doing there.

Primarily for his fellow Jews, he's showing them that no one can be adopted into the family of God simply because you were born in the right family tree. Born of blood, born of man.

[15 : 22] No, becoming a child of God is a privilege granted to all those who would be born of God. And here's the thing. Being a Jew doesn't automatically get you in.

But being a Gentile, non-Jew, doesn't automatically keep you out. And Jesus can give you and I that right because as the son of God, he came, he surrendered his right.

He who deserved heaven's praises, his earthly life began, the one that began in poverty in a Bethlehem stable would end in agony on a Roman cross. The sin that deserved to be punished, he came and he became it for us.

And the life that we couldn't live, he lived and he shares with us. Here's the point. Jesus has earned the right to give you the right.

And take stock of the familial language that John uses here. Could have picked any kind of metaphor. He goes for the family one.

[16 : 30] Here's the thing. God is not just a judge who's in the business of acquitting the guilty. Although wonderfully he is that. Actually, he's a judge who having wiped the slate clean, now invites all those to come and feast with him in his family home and live with him forever.

The gods, this God invites us to know forgiveness and that forgiveness opens the door for fellowship. This invitation is to come and know the living God.

That is the right that Jesus Christ has come to give. And it truly changes everything. This is why Christians go bonkers for this time of year. Because his birth, his arrival really is light into a dark world.

You know, just as we close, one of the Christmas crazes that's emerged over the past few years that people do in the run up to Christmas, you've seen this one, it's Elf on the Shelf. I feel like we missed the train in our house this year, but now having kind of got my head around the concept, we'll be very much aboard that train next year when it comes.

But the idea, I think this came from 2005, a novel of his, right? Really did my background on this.

The idea is that every night you put an Elf on your shelf, this Elf is in the living room for the month of December, and the Elf is Santa's eyes and ears in the room.

[17 : 54] Santa's spy. Every night what happens when you go to bed, the Elf goes back to the North Pole, tells Santa if you've been naughty or nice, and then reappears in your living room the next day in a different spot in the house to let you know that he's been and gone.

And that's the economy we kind of get in our world, right? We kind of get the whole behave well, rewarded fully thing. That's just how we work. But the economy of the gospel, dear friends, is completely the opposite.

This tells you that the economy of the gospel is believe and receive. The language of rights, hear that this morning. And particularly if you're here, and this really is a painful time of year, it brings back memories of people who are not around the Christmas table.

A right is something that's yours. But a right that's given by Jesus as opposed to being earned by us, that is a right that can never be taken away.

And it's one that is yours for life. That is something that we can build our lives upon. A right is true just as much on our worst days as it is true on our best days.

[19 : 11] A right is true in the times when the future is rosy and life is cushy. And it's true when the future is unclear and life is messy.

The status of being declared a child of God with everything that that entails because of your faith in Jesus, however unimpressive and unspectacular and painful your life might be right now.

That is your right. Advent reminds us, doesn't it, on a yearly basis, this season forces us in a way to slow down.

It reminds us that those who believe in Jesus, there's a bigger story at play in this world. A bigger story of a God who delights to save people so that he can dwell with his people.

So I want you to rejoice this morning that in the coming of Jesus, as God, the creator of all things, was writing himself into the human story. And that truly is the best, that truly is the greatest news, the good news, that you and I could ever hope to hear.

[20 : 22] Let me pray, and then we're going to stand to sing our last couple of songs. Son of Adam, son of heaven, given as a ransom, reconciling God and man, Christ, our mighty champion.

What a savior, what a friend, what a glorious mystery. Once a babe in Bethlehem, now the Lord of history. And so, Father, we thank you so much for Jesus, the one whose name means God saves.

Thank you that there is no God in heaven who is unlike him. Father, thank you that at this time of year, we're reminded of your beating heart that longs to save people from their greatest problem. Thank you that Jesus came as one who was light and full of life. And so, Lord, I pray particularly for those of us here this morning who are perhaps struggling. Those of us here this morning who are perhaps, this is all new, this is all new, wouldn't say that they follow Jesus.

Lord, I pray particularly for them. And I pray for us, Lord, who are awaiting his return, as Keita said at the beginning. Lord, for all of us here today, I pray that we would savor something more of the reason that Jesus came.

[21 : 53] Father, thank you that you love us. And we pray that you just be with us as we finish our service. And if you just spend more time together, we just pray all of these things in your loving name. Amen.