

The Reason I Came is to Be With You

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[0:00] Thank you very, very much everyone who took part in that. Thank you for just the hard work that you all put in to doing what a wonderful display.

Welcome you. If you are here for the very first time, we want to welcome you. We want to assure you that we take the Christmas message very, very seriously. In case you're wondering what just happened in the last hour, I want to assure you we take the message of the gospel very, very seriously.

We just don't take ourselves very seriously. And actually, this is a this is a gathering tradition. We've done this. I think this is the third year now. My wife, Christina, is the mastermind in all of this. Can we give her a round of applause? I want to invite her up in a bit. So but as you can see, such a well-oiled machine in terms of performance.

Everyone knew their parts. It's just silky smooth. I'm just so, so grateful. Thank you all for being here, packing here into this room. I know it doesn't feel like Christmas because it's so warm.

[1:03] I assure you, we feel the pain, too. It is very, very warm here. If you don't feel super comfortable, don't hesitate to stand in the back or actually upstairs. Shout out to everyone upstairs who I was with there upstairs. It's super comfortable up there.

And just really miss you guys here as well. Christmas. When I say Christmas, what do you think of? What's the first thing that comes to mind, Aaron? Jesus. Jesus. Boom. Pastor right there. Vincent, when I say Christmas, what's the first thing that comes to mind for you?

What presents I'm getting. What presents you're getting. Wow. Agnes, what presents he's getting. Kelly, what about you? Christmas, what do you think about? The tree.

The tree. That tree. That tree. Or that tree. The Christmas tree. You think? All kinds of trees. All kinds of trees. Let me go over to this side. Darren. Welcome back, Darren.

Yes. How are the sleepless nights? Are they okay? Manageable. Oh, okay. That's good. What do you think about when you think about Christmas? Family. Family. And I know there's family here as well. Welcome you.

[2:13] Christmas is the most intimate time of the year, right? I mean, the song goes, it's the most wonderful time of the year, but it's this most intimate time of the year where you just get to feel close with those who you love the most. Or even though you may love them, you also sometimes find them hard to be with, which is why you only see them once a year.

And you have this warmth that comes with Christmas, but then there's also this actually loneliness that comes, right? It is honestly sometimes the most lonely time of the year for people.

You can be packed in a room like this and still feel lonely. Am I right? Loneliness is a real issue. I was looking into this. Actually, yeah, Christina's dear family is here as well. Her sisters, her parents, and Rav, I was having a good conversation with him. And you're a clinical psychiatrist, psychologist.

Sorry, I always get that wrong. Psychologist. And we were having a really interesting conversation yesterday about the impact of loneliness. And how actually loneliness itself was, maybe a few years ago, was actually labelled by the World Health Organization as a global epidemic.

[3:21] It is a real issue. It is a real issue. And the physical impact, the physical effect of loneliness is akin to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It's linked to heart disease.

It's linked to diabetes. It's linked to lung cancer. Loneliness is a real issue. It's actually in 2018 when the UK appointed a minister of loneliness.

Loneliness. Unfortunately, they only appointed one person, so it was quite a lonely job. But they recognise that actually this is a real thing.

Have you felt lonely before? Just to differentiate and maybe create distinction, there is loneliness when you don't feel as though anyone knows you or cares about you or even sees you, which is different to being alone.

As I said, you can be in this room filled with people, and in Hong Kong it's filled with people, but still feel lonely. You can be alone, on your own, and parents of beautiful young children will enjoy the bliss of being alone and feel completely content and not lonely at all.

[4:30] Correct? I love being alone. Loneliness is different. But it's something that we must really think about.

And for those of us in the church, we often wonder, how do we deal with this loneliness? There's something in our hearts that cries for this. Actually, it was Queenie that shared the quote with me a couple of weeks ago, the Tim Keller quote that I really, really like, which is, to be loved and not known is superficial.

Right? Because if they love you, but they don't really know you, then it's not really the kind of love that you need. But to be known, but not loved, that is our greatest fear.

But to be fully known and truly loved, well, that's a little bit like being loved by God. It is what we all need in the deepest parts of our hearts.

We all want to feel like we are seen, known, and loved. There's a part of us, we all, by the way, if you're struggling with loneliness right here, I want to tell you that you are not alone.

[5:36] You are not the only one. The problem with loneliness is it's a bit of a vicious cycle. The moment you feel lonely, you start to cut people off because you don't feel people understand you. So you don't want to open yourself up to them.

And then they, people looking at you will go, well, actually, they don't want to be known. They don't want to be. And so actually, eventually, that cycle is just a vicious one that just reinforces itself. And then we have people who are lonelier and lonelier. And we live in a time where we are the most connected, but we are also the most lonely. When social media does exactly the opposite of what the name says.

So the question for us is, what do we do about that? The Bible talks about that. God, before humanity makes a mistake, when they choose to not trust him, he says there's one thing that's not good, which is for man to be alone.

We were built for community. We were hardwired for that. And actually, for the longest time in humanity, you were born into a community, about 50 to 150 people.

[6:40] And that would be your people. That would be your tribe for the whole of your life. That's what it was. And we would learn how to behave as humans in our community.

But actually, the loneliness started to creep in. The anti-social side started to creep in, not because of social media, but actually in the 50s, something called just social mobility. People started moving to different places to travel, to work.

And so you started moving. So that one group of people that you were born into now would constantly change. And is there a more transient city than Hong Kong? And so what happened from there is we started to move around and then we started to lose connection with people because we just did.

And now we are all on our phones and on our devices. And we actually struggled to learn how to interact with one another face to face. The synchronized communication that Jonathan Haidt talks about in his book, *The Anxious Generation*.

Because we've stopped doing that. Because now how we communicate with people is I will send Rocky a message and then he will leave me on blue tick. And then he will reply to me in a week or so's time.

[7:42] I mean, I'm not bitter about it, but it's just something that he does to me nearly every time I message him. And so I don't get to see his reaction when I message him. And so this is the problem that we have.

Well then, the problem here is this. How does really Christianity solve this? Or what is really the message of the gospel here? The message of the gospel, actually I was asked recently about this. What separates Christianity from everything else?

And I'll give you one answer. Grace. And what is that grace? It's that actually our creator knows that we were built for community, for communion. And he came to join us.

John 1 says the word became flesh. The message version says he moved into our neighborhood. Christianity is the only one where God does not cross his arms and says, Hey, can you work your way up to me by being a good person?

Christianity is the only one that does that. Christianity is the only one that says, God says, actually, you can't reach me. I will come to you. And that's why we have the name Emmanuel. God with us. [8:45] If there's one message of the Bible, if there's one message I want you to take away today, is that God came to be with you. Don't we all ask that question?

Where is God? You look at the fires in Taipo and you go, God, where were you? You remember the rejection that you faced on the playground as a child and you go, God, where were you?

You remember the time you were in the library and you received the message that you didn't get the job or the place that you applied for. And then you ask God, where are you? You look at every tragedy that happens in society.

And then you go, where are you? When I needed you the most, when my heart was the most broken, where were you? Isn't that the question that we all ask? And the message of the gospel is this.

God responds to that question by saying, I was right there. I was right there. The moment Joe and I lost our father at the dinner table that one night, he was right there.

[9:51] The moment a parent gives birth to a baby, but then loses the baby immediately, God was there. The moment there's a fire that cannot be contained, God was there.

Do you believe that? If there's one message that I want to get to you today is that God has been with you every moment of your life.

In the worst moments when you are the lowest in your life. Or in those happiest moments where you graduated from university, where you got the job that you wanted, where you celebrated your wedding.

Every single moment, the message is the same. I am with you. I am with you. I have always been with you.

That is the Christian message. And that's why we have the name Emmanuel. God with us. Do you take that word for granted?

[10:57] I do. This is why my prayer always has been when we do a church service like this, that it won't be a memorial service where we sing and we talk about a person who lived in the past.

But we actually sing and talk to him because he sat right there. Because he sat right there. Because he is present. He is here right now. Why? Because Emmanuel, God with us.

Have you been in the presence of someone who you don't feel as though you deserve to be with? Actually, every time someone meets Jesus in the Bible, they're just blown away.

Just like the spoken word three unwise men shared just then. That their lives turned upside down, transformed completely. When you're in the presence of greatness, something changes in you. You don't even want to be in. You're like, I'm not even worthy to be there. And yet the God of heaven comes down and spends time with us. That is the message.

[11:56] And what does that do? Well, he says, I've come. So don't lose heart because I will turn your sorrow. That moment that you have been the most sorrowful in your life, I will turn that into joy. Romans 8 talks about this, that actually the whole creation is groaning.

Are you great? I'm great. Every time I look at the news, I'm like, oh God. Where are you? What are you doing here? This doesn't make sense.

This brokenness doesn't make sense. This corruption doesn't make sense. And God says, I am here. And this pain that you're feeling is the same pain that a pregnant lady who's just about to give birth is going through.

That there is pain. There is sorrow. But the moment that baby comes, there is life. There is joy. And I've come to turn sorrow into joy. I've come to give you peace.

A peace that this world cannot give. You thought that job would give you peace. Surprise, it doesn't. You thought that number in your bank account would give you peace. Surprise, it doesn't. This world cannot give us that peace.

[12:56] There is only one who gives that peace. And actually, it's a peace that doesn't make sense. I remember during COVID, during the fifth wave, I remember that's what the Lord, I was so upset. Because some of the regulations, some of the lifestyle here, everything was just caving in.

I was like, none of this makes sense. And God says, that's okay. Your job is to have a peace that doesn't make sense. When everyone else is complaining and moaning about everything that's going on, you're supposed to have a peace that doesn't make sense.

The Bible calls that the peace that surpasses understanding. Can we be people who sit in front of others going, yeah, the world is falling apart, but I have peace that comes from God.

And then it gives you hope. Not hope in things that you can see, but in things that you cannot, knowing that it will come again. Just like the pregnant lady who's going through the pains of childbirth, but that comes.

Isn't it interesting that the Bible keeps using that as an analogy? What it's saying here is that actually there is pain, but there will be life at the end. Where sometimes we are so afraid that there is pain and that will lead to death.

[13:55] But actually the Bible says, no, no. This pain is going to bring out life. Life creation is going to be just like how I intended it to be. But it does have to go through this pain.

And finally, love. Love the thing that makes the world go around. The thing that even the Beatles, the Black Eyed Peas will all sing about. Everyone's chasing after it. Everyone wants this and is asking, where is that?

And we know that love is a person. Jesus. This love, this peace, this hope, this joy comes to be with us.

And when he is with us, when we are in his presence, there is the fullness of joy. When we are in his presence, where his spirit is, there is freedom. Don't you want that freedom? I do.

And the Christmas message reminds me of that. God with us. God is with us. If you don't know him, can I tell you, that's okay because he knows you.

[14:58] And he knows you to the very depths of your soul. He knows you in the highest moments and the lowest moments. And he wants to tell you that he has been with you all along. And he's standing at the door and he's knocking. And he's knocking.

And he gives us this hope, not because he came as a baby. It's because he didn't stay in the stable. He didn't stay in the manger. He grew up sinless. He grew up to show us how to love.

He showed us a different way to live. But we actually don't have hope because he did that. We have hope because he then went to the cross to die for us. Every parent knows this feeling.

In order to give life to your offspring, you must die to yourself. You must have those sleepless nights where you know I want to sleep. But in order to sustain you, I will die to myself. And so our creator does just that.

He dies for us. And then we don't have hope just because of that. We have hope because not only does he die, but then he rises again. He came to be with us and he is coming back to be with us again.

[16:03] That is the hope that should fill us with joy. It should free us from all the fears of this world. Emmanuel. God with us. We're just about to finish the service now.

But if I may, I would love to pray for us. And I would love to pray for every single person in this room that you would feel the presence of Jesus right here, right now.

Shall we bow our heads? Thank you, Lord. That because of you, we can be alone, but we don't need to be lonely.

You moved into our space. You moved into our neighborhood. And you had one message. That I'm with you.

We lean into that message today. And we give you thanks. We give you thanks that you are here right now.

[17:04] Would you make your presence known and real to us? In your name we pray. Amen.