

Matthew 1:21 Carol Service talk 2019

“The Big Issue” (And the Big Solution!)

Matt 1:21

And so this is Christmas....! Thank you for joining us at our first ever evening carol service, and a huge thank you to the singers and the readers for making tonight happen.

I wonder if I could start by asking you a question. *What is the “BIG ISSUE” that we are facing as we approach Christmas 2019?*

Well the Big Issue is the name of the homeless magazine started in the 1990s which promotes awareness about **homelessness** and helps homeless people to get off the streets. According to latest statistics¹ homelessness has risen by 15% on the previous year, and the average age that a homeless person dies is 44 years old. It’s a big issue.

Others would say no it’s far bigger than that, it’s **climate change**. Unless things change right now, it’s already too late for our children and our children’s children. Greta Thunberg, teenage campaigner, recently said to politicians in Brussels. “I want you to act like the house is on fire, because it is”².

But just days after the election, others would look to politics, and say that the big issue facing our country at the moment is **Brexit**. This is a life changing moment for the nation, and we are about to finally “get things done” or make a terrible mistake, depending on who you voted for.

But I wonder if actually the election was more about **trust** than Brexit, with one BBC commentator saying that we would be choosing which leader we distrust least³. People are asking the question, “can we trust our political leaders to tell the truth”; and that was certainly raised in our local hustings a couple of weeks ago.

Homelessness, Climate Change, Brexit, Trust. They are all big issues.

But what if there’s a bigger issue, an issue that actually underpins everything else, an issue which, if we could get to grips with, would sort out all the other big issues that we will face as we approach 2020.

That’s why heading back to basics, back to the Bible is so important, because here we don’t get fake news or empty promises, we get God talking to us, and addressing us clearly, directly and lovingly.

In our 3rd reading in Matthew, it’s the point at which we meet a young man whose girlfriend is pregnant with a child he didn’t father, being told by a messenger from heaven that the baby is from God, and his “name is to be called Jesus because he will save his people from their sins”.

Here at this moment 2000 years ago, 2000 miles away, not long before the baby in the manger with the shepherds and the angels God himself is telling us what is the **big issue**, and what is the **big solution**.

Let’s start with the BIG ISSUE.

I don’t know about you, but I hate it when people don’t tell me the full story. If I’m at the doctors and something is wrong I want to know everything.

And so it’s good news that the angel doesn’t mince his words as he spells out the BIG ISSUE. The problem is called sin. “HE will save his people from their sins”.

The angel is talking about the Jewish nation and their need to be rescued from God’s anger for the way they had consistently and ruthlessly abandoned God and gone their own way.

But before we point the finger, there are three pointing back at ourselves. This is the Bible’s diagnosis for all of humanity.

Sin is a simple word with I at the centre, and that’s what sin is. Me at the centre of my life living as if I’m in charge instead of God. It’s actually the problem that underlies all other problems.

¹ <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/about-homelessness/>

² https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/greta-speeches#greta_speech_feb21_2019

³ John Pienaar, BBC Radio 4, 11th December 2019.

There's a reason people are sleeping rough on the streets- because of broken human relationships caused by selfishness. There's a reason why people won't change their ways to protect the planet- because we are selfish, and don't want to stop doing things the way we want. There's a reason why we can't trust people, because getting their way is sometimes more important than telling you the truth.

So this biggest issue of sin actually underpins all the other big issues. Sin is simply a word with I in the centre. But actually, it's more than that- I am at the centre, because I don't want God to be.

I wonder if you have ever got to grips with the big issue. That we live in God's world but we don't want him. We want the gifts but we don't want the Giver.

The thing about this crisis is that you can actually see it, but none of us likes to admit it. We see it on our **news feeds**- stabbings on London Bridge, potential genocide in Myanmar, rich and powerful men that can buy off their victims of sexual harassment so that they don't have to admit they did anything wrong.

We see it in our own **families**- fights, fallings out, divorce, mental health.

We even see it in our own **lives**: fighting, bitterness, lies, and selfishness- and that's just me an Anglican vicar! But we don't like to admit it, because none of us wants to front up. But actually discovering the bad news is wonderful because it leads us to the good news.

You have to go deep enough to get to the big issue beneath the other big issues, and that is sin. That doesn't mean I never do things to help other people, but that fundamentally my heart is faulty and guilty.

It's a crisis far bigger than climate change because it doesn't affect our environmental future, it affects our eternal future in heaven or hell. Jesus himself was kind enough to warn us about that when he said "fear him

who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him". He's lovingly warning us of where sin takes us.

We are all excited to have the new A14 opening up, bypassing Huntingdon, and leaving the air cleaner and quieter, even if there's more traffic in Godmanchester for a few more months.

Well Ely are not so fortunate. Their bypass has stumbled, because it's already sinking into the fens. The foundations aren't deep enough and 13 million of pounds more public money⁴ needs to be pumped into getting deep enough.

Well thank God that he goes deep enough to diagnose to us what our big issue is. It's selfishness.

"Come on, give us something positive at Christmas", you say, "I thought Christmas was about peace on earth and goodwill to all mankind".

Well it's important to know the big issue, because then we are able to address whether there's anything we can do about it.

And the answer is we can't do anything about it, because we are stuck.

A young lad was walking in the fens in Huntingdonshire (as it was then) in 1851 up near Holme. He was a long way from anyone, and he sunk into mud up to his neck. There was nothing he could do to get out. For hours he shouted for help, but no-one heard him. His parents just thought he'd gone to stay with his grandmother in Sawtry.

The next day he was still there, barely alive, and he saw labourers in the distance, but he was so cold he didn't have enough strength to call out. One man came nearby, but he was too exhausted to make any sound. Miraculously the boy was spotted, and hauled out of the mud to safety⁵. That boy is a picture of us. We are drowning in our sin. We can't help ourselves. We can't get out of it.

But a rescuer has come.

⁴ <https://www.cambridge-news.co.uk/news/local-news/ely-bypass-budget-overspend-road-14492773>

⁵ "The Little Book of Cambridgeshire" Caroline Clifford & Alan Akeroyd p56

This is the BIG SOLUTION.

“You are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins”.

Just suppose a friend is working on cooking the perfect Christmas meal, and everything goes wrong and they ask you if you can help rescue their dinner from being ruined. And because of your track record in the kitchen before now, you say “rescue” is my middle name! Well rescue is actually Jesus’ first name. His name, originally Yeshua or Joshua means rescuer, and he has come to save his people from their sins.

He is the one that sees us dying in the cold, and has come to rescue us. *“You are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins”.*

This is why Christmas is such good news. God has taken pity on his rebellious humanity and sent his only son to rescue us. Jesus is God come to earth on a rescue mission. Christmas points to Easter, because Jesus was born to die. It was there on the cross that Jesus dealt with our sin. He didn’t stand aloof by the side of the mud and say, “make a fresh start, turn over a new leaf, try harder, see if you can rescue yourself”.

God got his hands dirty, and came to rescue us, and died in our place to take our sin away. He paid for it instead. And to anyone who calls out to him for rescue he comes with power to change our lives now, and to take us to a better place in the future. Jesus himself is the most wonderful gift that we can receive this Christmas.

He is God, and he is alive, and he stands before us tonight offering to change our lives and take away our sins.

“You will give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins”. Do you agree with the Big Issue? Are you willing to admit that you have a problem. If you are there’s wonderful news of a Big solution. *“You are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins”.*

The question is will you be one of his people? I’d like to give you an invitation this Christmas. In the new year we are running a course called “Christianity Explored”⁶. It’s a brilliant course that does 2 things.

First with some excellent DVD material it takes us back to the real Christian message of the Bible to get to grips with this big issue of sin, and the big solution of Jesus the Saviour.

Second it gives us a chance to ask or listen to any question you like about Christianity.

- IS it true. Did this actually happen.
- What do Christians think about the environment or sex or gambling.
- If God is so great why does he let such bad things happen?

We’re starting on the evening of Thursday 2nd January, but if you can’t make the course, we can meet you separately or give you the video downloads to watch in your own time. Just return this little postcard to me or give me a ring.

I would like to check it out in 2020. Don’t be scared. Could be the most wonderful discovery you make. Because after all we only have one life, and I believe Jesus is the one who can help us!

But for now, let’s turn to our next carol, In the Bleak Midwinter. I’m not sure there was snow on snow in the middle east that first Christmas, but the final verse is wonderful. What do we give to the one who has given everything to us? And maybe this is you for the first time this Christmas. What I can I give him. Give my heart. Let’s pray.

Thank you for your kindness in explaining the big issue. And it’s such a big issue that if we don’t do anything about it we will face a terrible future. Thank you for sending Jesus the Big Solution. Thank you that a relationship with him can start now. Please help each one of us to turn to Jesus this Christmas. Amen.

⁶ <https://www.christianityexplored.org/>