

## THEFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

18<sup>th</sup> December 2005

### Carol Service The Xmas Factor

I wonder how many of us have watched the ITV series X Factor over the last few weeks?! Own up now – it's not a mortal sin!

The idea behind the show is quite simple: to find one person or group who has the "X factor", that special quality which means they will be able to make it as a Pop Star. Initially, some 50,000 people applied for an audition, and all had their moment to impress the judges with their raw talent. The widest array of people imaginable applied, many of whom were obvious no-hopers before they even opened their mouths. Some took it seriously, as though their very lives depended on getting through to the next round; while others treated it as, well, entertainment.

Slowly – perhaps painfully slowly – over the course of a couple of months, the hoard of wanna-be stars were whittled down to just a handful. Initially, the decision was down to a panel of judges – but in the later stages, the great British public could decide who survived to sing another week – and in so doing help to finance the whole show.

So what does it take to make it? What is the X factor? What makes one person stand out from the crowd, what enables him or her to rise above his or her peers, and achieve what they cannot? Of course, looks play their part – no-one wants to see an ugly person on stage or on TV. Part of that is innate, but a lot of it is presentation – it's amazing what a new hair-style can do for someone's image! Then of course there is talent – those who were tone deaf and unable to hold a tune didn't get past the first hurdle. But just having a good voice is not enough to get all the way – they need the right coaching, the right choice of songs, the right backing; they need to give the right performance, week after week, to win.

Winning the X-Factor is no easy achievement – after all, if everyone could do it then it wouldn't be so special.

The programme's makers do their best to make it essential viewing, to generate interest (and hence revenue) from a wide audience. But when all is said and done, the search for another Pop star is hardly critical to the future of mankind! For the winner, there is the promise of fame and wealth – but for the rest of us, it makes little difference to our lives. We would be none the poorer if we had never heard of Shane - and if you have never heard of him still, then you can rest assured that you haven't missed much.

Anyway, the point is that the search for the X factor is, and only ever can be, entertainment. It may seem important to the thousands of devoted fans of this hopeful or that, but it is of no real consequence and if anything only offers a fleeting pleasure, for audience or star alike.

But we are not here to talk about the X factor all night. This service is not about the search for the X factor, but about the search for the X-mas factor – that very special quality which allows someone to become Saviour of the world.

We don't need another Pop star to idolise. We do need a Saviour, someone who will save us not just from all the bad things in the world out there, but from all the bad things in our own hearts. We don't need another singer to entertain us with powerful or moving or simply entertaining songs. We do need a Saviour who will bring peace not just to the world out there, but to our own troubled hearts. We do need a Saviour who will make a way for us to enjoy eternal life in his presence.

If the search for the X-Factor is a long and trying one, how much more will the search for the Xmas Factor be? If fewer than 1 in 50,000 people who get as far as applying will make it to the end, what are the odds of finding a Saviour? 1 in a million? 1 in a billion? Is it even possible?

Possible or not, people continue to look for the X-mas factor – the thing which will bring them peace and joy not just for a Carol Service, but for the whole year; for their whole life; and indeed beyond into eternity. Clearly this is a search worth undertaking, in fact worth spending your whole life pursuing.

It's one of the tragic ironies of our great civilisation, that the more material wealth we have, the more things we gather around ourselves for our amusement, the more "free" we are to pursue our own desires without being burdened by out-of-date prejudices – the less satisfied we have become, the less easy we sleep at night, the less peace we have in our hearts.

Truly Jesus was right when he said "If you want to save your life you will lose it..." (Matthew 16:25).

So many people have become disenchanted with modern life that it has become fashionable to consider the spiritual dimension of existence – particularly when you are free to explore it your way, without the shackles of commitment to a prescriptive religion.

Did you catch that series Jonathan Edwards presented earlier this year, called "Spirituality Shopper"? This epitomised the post-modern approach to spirituality. Each week Jonathan met a different person who was conscious of their need for more inner peace in the midst of their busy lives. He introduced them to a variety of different spiritual practices, like chanting, or meditation, or community service, or even whirling like the dervishes. The spiritual shoppers had to try all the practices – maybe three or four for each person – for a few weeks, and then report back on how effective they were.

On the programmes I watched, the people seemed to benefit from their new spiritual practices, feeling more calm and in control of their lives than beforehand. And they were planning to keep up at least one of their new spiritual practices. They had begun their search for the Xmas factor – but had they really found a Saviour?

There is a big step between accepting that your life needs a more spiritual dimension to bring balance to the frantic pace and stress of 21<sup>st</sup>-Century living, and admitting that you need an actual Saviour. Maybe it's something to do with the pride in our hearts, which would rather not admit that we can't do it on our own. And maybe it's to do with the remote odds of ever finding a Saviour anyway.

Where would you start looking? Would you look to Politicians, whose work shapes the way of life of countries and continents? Can they save us from ourselves?

Or to Engineers, who apply scientific knowledge to help our lives become more comfortable? Can they bring us joy?

Or to Doctors, who apply increasingly detailed knowledge about how our bodies work to tackle disease and to keep us healthy and active longer? Can they bring something close to eternal life?

Or to Generals, who fight battles on our behalf to allow us to live more securely without fear of our enemies. Can they bring us peace?

Some time ago the BBC launched a search to find the greatest Britain of all time – a somewhat more modest aim than finding the Saviour of the world. All sorts of people were nominated – politicians, engineers, doctors, generals and many more. And without exception, this list of the elite of our country all had some serious flaws, be it rudeness, drunkenness, prejudice or whatever. Even the best Brit ever (who incidentally was reckoned to be Winston Churchill) would not even get through the initial audition for the X-mas factor.

One of the judges of X-Factor, Simon Cowell, has become famous for his rather severe assessment of the weaker candidates he judged – he has made his name by calling it as he sees it, rather than pussy-footing around the issue. That and wearing ridiculously high-waisted trousers! Perhaps he could be more diplomatic, but he has a point: those who simply don't have what it takes, who clearly do not have the X-factor, have to be weeded out – it does them and us no favours to keep them in the competition.

So too for the X-mas factor, the bar has to be high. Just as you can't have a pop-star who sings out of tune, so you can't have a Saviour who needs to be saved himself! If the very best that our country has to offer does not come close, then that doesn't leave much hope for finding the Xmas factor... the best we can hope for ourselves is a few uplifting moments from one of those spiritual practices – somewhat short of peace on earth!

The conclusion has to be that no-one on earth has the Xmas factor. And this was in fact God's own conclusion in Isaiah 59:15 – he saw that there was no-one who could save.

No man who was ever born was good enough to be the Saviour – in fact, everyone was bad enough to need a Saviour himself, so in essence the problem would just continue getting worse with each generation.

What a desperate situation mankind was in. Desperately in need of a saviour, and no contestants left in the Xmas factor competition.

But God did not give up. If no-one else was good enough to save, then he would have to do it himself. But how could he enter the competition? How could he save us? It's all very well for him up in Heaven, where everything is sweetness and light. It's not surprising that he is so perfect when nothing impure or evil or just slightly less than perfect can exist in his presence. He may be good enough to win the Xmas-factor competition sat in Heaven; but could he continue to meet the grade down here on earth?

Here we come to the mystery and, if I can use that word, the magic of the Incarnation, where God takes on flesh as a man. Or rather, as a baby. Only by starting life as we all do, and living life in the same circumstances that we all find ourselves in, could Christ demonstrate that he was able to be our Saviour. I suppose he could have come to earth as a full-grown man, and got to the Cross much quicker; but then there might always be some doubt about how much better than us he really was. Maybe if *we* started life as a mature adult, we would have avoided the temptations of reckless youth too.

God rarely if ever appears to be in a hurry to work out his plans, so the fact that it would take 30 years for his son to start his public ministry on earth was of no consequence. What was important was the example he would set. It is possible to live on this earth without being tainted by sin. We cannot blame our environment for everything that is wrong in our lives, because Christ shared the same environment and yet was without sin.

It was an audacious plan with extremely high odds. Theologians have argued for centuries whether Christ could have slipped up and done something wrong during his life on earth, simply because the consequences of him doing so are so great. On the one hand, if Jesus could continue in sinless perfection throughout his life on earth, and offer that life willingly as a sacrifice for us, then we could be saved. But on the other hand, if he slipped up just once in deed or word or thought, then not only would we be without a Saviour for ever, but the unity of the Godhead would be in question, and maybe Satan would have won after all.

Christ's entrance into our world by being born of Mary marked the start of this most dramatic and important of stories. Truly, as one of the carols reminds us, "the hopes and fears of all the years were met in him that night".

It is precisely because it was such a momentous event that Christmas has been celebrated for the last two thousand years – and on December 25<sup>th</sup> since 350AD. The entrance onto the stage of humanity of the divine Son of God is one of the most important events in all of history, with a significance that extends way beyond the stable in Bethlehem where he was born. No wonder that choir of angels appeared to the shepherds on the first Christmas night – I bet they couldn't contain their excitement any longer! What a privilege for those men to be awake at that time, and to be chosen to see the new-born King.

It was a most remarkable thing for the shepherds to see that great company of angels and hear them singing praises to God – surely an event unique in history. Whereas to see a new-born baby was pretty much an every day event. Yet the baby they saw was so special that it was the baby and not the angels which was the centre of attention, and the centre of their story when they related it to their families, friends, and any-one who would listen.

In another great irony of 21<sup>st</sup>-Century life, we would rather see the Angels than Christ; and would rather see Holy and Ivy than Angels.

The X-mas factor has gone from Christmas itself. Only for a very few is it still a celebration of the coming of the Saviour into our world. Christmas has been taken over by greed, consumerism, selfishness, gluttony and drunkenness. Far from being an oasis of peace amidst the desert of stress which is the modern life, it has become a focal point of personal and family tensions.

There is the stress of deciding which present to get everyone – it can't be too big a gift, or the recipient will be embarrassed; nor can it be too small, or they will be offended. It must be something they will like, or they might not like you any more. Within your family, you must spend exactly the same on each child or there will be fits of jealousy and cries of unfairness.

Then there is the stress of preparing the Christmas meal, which of all meals in the year has to be perfect. And for many there is the difficulty of spending much more time together as a family or as a couple than is normal, and finding you all get on each other's nerves but there is nowhere else to go, because all your normal friends are busy letting their families get on their nerves too!

And finally, there is the stress of how to pay for it all once the Barclaycard bill comes in the New Year; a stress which can last for many months and bring despair and not joy to the next year.

No wonder more families break up at Christmas time than any other time of year. But what a sad way to celebrate the Birth that was to bring Peace on Earth and Goodwill towards all men!

While we should and I guess do know better, it is all too easy for us to fall into the same trap that society around us has done. If the only thing that distinguishes our Christmas day from our neighbours is that we come up to Chapel for an hour in the morning, then maybe we need to re-asses where our priorities lie.

We need to reclaim Christmas for Christ. It is not an unknown X-mas factor which people are so desperately in need of, it is the Christ factor. All the ills of today's Christmas can be traced to the removal of Christ from the celebrations. Abbreviating Christmas to X-mas is a great symbol of what has gone on – so I hope none of you are offended by my use of it as the title of my talk!

We need to get back to the heart of the Christmas story. Then the magic of Christmas will be restored. That doesn't mean we should spend our Christmas day in a cold stable, but that we should remember that "it" is all about Christ – not just Christmas, but life itself, revolves around Him.

The very things which cause strife to the secular Christmas can be made good when we recognise that Christ is at the centre. The giving and receiving of gifts can remind us that we are loved, and that we love – so it is the relationship and not the present which is important. Moreso, let's remember that it was God who sent the first Christmas gift, when he sent Christ into he world. No-one should be disappointed or offended by that present!

The larger-than-normal meal that we eat together can point us with thanks to the more than ample provision that God has made for our spiritual needs, thanks to the perfect life of the baby he sent at Christmas. And the time we spend together, away from the stresses of work and normal life, can remind us of the time we will share together in Heaven forever – when there will be no falling out over who watches what on the Telly!

So let's allow the Christ-mas factor to be present in our lives every day, as the gift of Peace he gives us is for life, not just for Christmas!

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