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#97 Christmas special - your Qs about Tom's life and work

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers listener questions about his role as Senior Research Fellow at Wycliffe Hall Oxford, his work habits and love of classical music... plus a Christmas question or two.

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Transcript

her. The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Hello, welcome along to the show and a very happy Christmas to you.

It's Justin Briley bringing you the regular sit down with NT Wright. And today we're going to be well having a bit of fun looking at questions around Mary and Joseph and those gifts they receive. Plus asking Tom questions about himself you often write in with your questions for Tom such as what does a senior research fellow at Wickcliffe Hall do exactly? How does he manage to produce all of that stuff he produces and what about his love of classical music and more besides.

So looking forward to asking Tom all of those questions today. The show brought to you in partnership as usual with NT Wright Online and SBCK and Premier I'm the theology and apologetics editor for Premier. I'm so glad when people get in touch with telling us you know how the show has helped them in some way or another.

One person wrote in with this review saying I was very much struggling with my faith last year and this podcast as well as NT Wright's other material has really helped me. The Eagle to tackle difficult questions in an intelligent, authentic and caring way and have helped me have a much more thorough understanding of scripture God and Jesus. You're not the only one.

I personally benefit hugely from having these conversations with Tom. There's so much

that falls into place when I have these conversations. So yeah we're all on a learning journey together and we're lucky to have a wise mentor like Tom on so many of these issues.

If you've enjoyed the podcast in the past year do rate and review as helps others to discover the show and if you'd like to support us with an end of year gift and help us to keep the podcast strong into 2022 and help others discover more of this material. You can do that with the links from today's show and if you want more from the show make sure to sign up as well at askentyright.com. Let's get into your questions. We're working along and a very happy Christmas to you.

This is our Christmas episode in which we'll have at least one Christmas question but actually it's a bit of a chance to bring together a few questions for this episode, Tom, about you and your habits and your pleasures and enjoyments and that sort of thing. So we'll start with our Christmas question. This is a great one.

A trivial one maybe says Shuler in Berry New South Wales but I always wonder what Mary and Joseph did with the gold, frank and sense and mer any thoughts. Oh goodness, pause for all kinds of silly children's books and cartoons and goodness knows what and pictures of Mary having just had a child saying that's our last thing I need. I was a clean nappy's.

I was a clean nappy's please and this and that and the other. Yeah, I mean who knows who knows who knows and did they take it with them in the flight to Egypt or had they safely deposited it with either Joseph's relatives or Mary's relatives. I have absolutely no idea.

Of course some people would say it was all symbolic anyway that the whole thing but it's such a strange story and as an ancient historian I'm rather inclined to say when you get strange stories like this which nevertheless have quite a sharp focus, you know, these guys went to the wrong king, they went to Herod and had to be redirected and all that stuff going on. No, I'm happy to say let's stay with the story but I wish I knew, I wish I knew. It may only have been a small piece of gold, a small thing of frank and sense and a small vial or whatever of mer, symbolic and strangely dark in their meaning.

So thanks to the question, I think over Christmas I shall ask my friends and family that question and see if I get any good answers. So you can go up with the best scenario, what will happen? Well turning from Christmas questions to questions about you, people often like to ask sort of about your own personal study habits and enjoyment and things like that. Toby in London wants to know Tom, you've written hundreds of books and articles and probably delivered thousands of lectures.

I'd like to know how you research, how you keep track of all you read and draw on all that information for everything that you're producing. What methods do you use to

collect information as you work on your various projects? I wish I had a better answer for this. You can probably see in the background of this picture, there are piles of papers and books and I live with imminent chaos with stuff which I vaguely know where it is and I vaguely know that one of those notebooks over there has the scribbled notes that I'm making for a book or article or whatever that I may be writing or a course of lectures that I have to do.

I try to stay on top of them but for me the next project is always more fun than the one I was working on six weeks ago. So this is just a personality problem which I have. So I do try to keep track if I have notebooks, I've got one here I can happily show you.

Those are the notes for the talk I gave at a student meeting last night and this goes back. I try to keep dates. So I like this size notebook which will, it's not too bulky to carry around and I can actually read what I scribble in it just about but this goes back here some notes for a webinar I was doing a month or two ago.

Here's some notes from a lecture that I attended and from time to time I go back through these notebooks and I've got lots of them scattered around and try to say, "Ah yes now I need to follow that up and I need to email somebody about that or that will contribute to this project that I'm doing." When I'm working on a biblical commentary then that's comparatively easy because you can see here's the text here are my notes on these bits of text. I probably have a loosely file or whatever for that. I'm not very good at keeping those sorts of notes online.

There are lots of software programs now. I know people tell me about them where people can drop in notes into a piece of software and then easily retrieve them. I'm too old for that.

I came into word processing and I'm sticking with that and I'm not trying to use electronic means for other things. Part from anything else I like to do kind of mind mapping and I write a word in the middle of a sheet of paper and then have lines going out from it and then other things connecting. I know again you can do that on a computer.

I find it much easier on a notebook or maybe a large A3 size of paper which I can then look at and think, "Oh, wait a minute. That goes with that and I'm repeating myself here so let's put those together and so on." When I was writing my biggest ever book which was Paul and the Faithfulness of God, I had a room in Princeton where I was on sabbatical where the bookshelves went up to about chest high and then it was blank wall above that and I basically wall-paper the whole room with large post-its, sort of mega-sized post-its and each chapter in the book had its own one which started off with just a few scribbles and after a month or two they were all covered because as I was reading articles and books and studying the texts of themselves of Paul's letters, I was thinking, "Ah, now that belongs in chapter four so we need to have something on there." So I

could actually see the book developing and that enabled me to keep tabs on what was going on which otherwise would have been very difficult with a large and complex project and that was really quite fun. I've never had a room like that since because as you can see in this room the bookshelves go up to the walls everywhere where there isn't a window so that isn't an option.

That's how I do it and it's a bit scatty and I no doubt miss tricks and I forget things and have to come back to them but that's just how it's been and I kind of keep running to stay ahead of myself and occasionally go back and pick up things from behind me. Well it works obviously, it's not perfect but it does the job. I've always, yeah, bold over by the amount you managed to produce Tom but sticking with the sort of the area of work and research and so on.

John in Gloucestershire says, "What exactly does a senior research fellow at Whitcliffe Hall at the University of Oxford do?" And he also adds here, "I've recently watched Dr. Becky Smithhurst a day in the life of an Oxford University astrophysicist. Could you give a description something along those lines please?" Well I'm afraid we don't, I don't think either of us have watched that so, but, or so I don't know whether you can't. I mean Whitcliffe Hall has had a track record over many years now of having somebody who is basically retired coming and being a part-time associate.

I mean the most recent one before me was Michael Green and in fact one of the things I had to do when I arrived was to do a Michael Green lecture in his memory because he had died not long before and it wasn't that he died so they got me, he was actually stepping down anyway and the principal said, "Look Tom, if you're coming up to retirement why don't you and Maggie come and live in Oxford and we'll give you a house where they basically pay the rent, they don't pay me a salary." So that's quite a good arrangement, Emma, on a pension and so on, but that enables us to be here in Oxford near a family which is very nice. But my duties are that once a year I do a course of lectures of Bible Expositions at the moment I'm in the middle of a series of nine or ten Expositions on Romans 8 which has been very exciting and then the rest of the year I will do individual sermons, individual lectures, they'll have a course on such and such and they'll say, "Tom will you do the one on whatever it is?" So that they had a course on Genesis and would I do the one on I forget which bit of Genesis it was I did and likewise if there are special occasions where they want something a little different they'll say could you preach for this particular occasion. But then the other thing which because of the pandemic hasn't really been happening frustratingly is I'm supposed to be meeting with students individually or in small groups so that students will often have questions about their academic work, questions about putting together academic and pastoral life which is of course what I've tried to do all my life.

And so I'm always delighted to sit down and maybe have a cup of coffee with one or two or three students and say, "Okay let's chew this over, where are you in your course and

what's going on and how can we help and what books might it be good to recommend that you read?" So that for instance this afternoon I'm meeting one such who's halfway through a course and wanting to know about future directions and so on. It will maybe spend an hour together and just think about that and pray about it. And so I am not anyone's tutor, I'm not anyone's official pastor, I'm merely an old lag around the place who has seen a bit of church life and academic life and may sometimes be able to say, "It might help if you did such and such" or whatever.

And if that's useful then that suits me. The main thing that I do actually is day by day, Monday through Friday, Wycliffe students meet together for worship. On Monday that includes a Bible exposition, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday it's morning prayer, Tuesday afternoon, early evening there's a college Eucharist.

And I try to be there for those services because for me being part of that prayerful, studying pastoral community is where it's at. And the prayer and the study and the pastoral stuff is the combination that I've tried to live with all my life. So I was delighted, I'm very happy to be there.

They actually invented the title "senior research fellow" as a way of sort of as a gesture towards doing some stuff around the place but we know that you're actually retired. So at the moment I'm thoroughly in love. Yes and I'm sure, as I'm sure it has in your other academic positions, being around young people who are coming through and going through those early stages of theological getting together with things.

I'm sure it's very invigorating as well. Okay let's switch to classical music. Another of your great passions, Tom.

Melissa in Portland, Oregon asks, "I know you're a classical music fan, Tom. I'm a classical pianist and piano teacher pursuing a master's in piano performance. I often consider how my Christian faith intersects with my profession and how my music career contributes to God's beautiful world.

Do you have any thoughts regarding how classical music is meaningful in the Christian worldview and in God's kingdom?" Wow. All sorts of... Yeah and she also was also on a non-theological note. I'd love to know what some of Tom's favorite classical composers or pieces are.

Though maybe it is a theological note as well. So do you want to start with your favorites and then we'll get into the sort of the theology? Yeah I once had to do... I once was the guest on the Radio 3 program called Private Passions, which is like a slightly up-marked version of Desert Island Discs. And I think I had some Bach, I think I had some Sebelius, I had some jazz actually as well.

I can't just remember what else I had. But I'm fairly eclectic in my tastes. I love early

choral music and the fact that Maggie and I now live right opposite the gate of New College in Oxford and two of our sons are two sons both sang in the choir there at various stages and we love that choral music.

So if you take me back to Purcell in the 17th century or then particularly to Talis and Bird and Tomkins in the 16th century and to think of choral even song with that sort of music that is just wonderful. And that music was written in order to talk about heaven on earth and it really does. But coming forward I've always loved the Bach passions.

I think the Bach Matthew Passion was the first thing I sang in as a seven-year-old choristor. And actually being in a church choir really nurtured that love of classical music for me. And of course Handel's Messiah was a staple and I then broadened out into other bits of Handel as well.

But the Messiah remains as a sort of back marker for so much else. And then Bach and Handel but then you come forward into Haydn Mozart and Beethoven. I actually love Haydn.

My wife finds him rather boring. I think there's a lot going on there. Mozart we were in the Sheldonian Theatre the other night listening to a performance of Mozart's Requiem which was just stunning and held onto us and we both the next morning still had some of that music in our heads and so on.

Beethoven of course we went to a performance of the Emperor Concerto again a few weeks. It's one of the glories of being in Oxford. We can actually walk to these things.

And again that music is so rich and so strong and so solid. But for me as well Schubert Schumann you come forward into the 19th century. I had my Wagner moment a few years ago.

My son my oldest son and I went to a complete performance of the ring. Took a week out and simply did it and my goodness I want to do it again someday but it's like having a 25 course meal and you get oh my goodness. I remember you talking about this because I remember it was that the when we first started recording this podcast that you had just been to see the Wagner ring cycle and with watching Ella Goode.

Then when I was an undergraduate I became very good friends and still good friends with a man who's who introduced me to Sebelius. I'd known some Sebelius before but he actually eased me into some of the darker bits like the fourth symphony and so on. And I still think that Sebelius 7 is the symphony to end all symphonies as it were.

It certainly ended it for Sebelius sadly which he'd written more but it is just the most amazing masterpiece. I'm not so good on the on the later 20th century stuff though I do love Vorn Williams. Vorn Williams is fifth I think is just magnificent and some of the modern choral music is extraordinary as well.

There've been all sorts of things but that tells you basically where I am. I wish I could still play the piano when I was young. I played it a great deal when I was studying for my degree.

I would award myself quarter of an hour's piano playing if I'd done two hours of the desk and so on and I learned oh I don't know Schubert Sonatas and that sort of thing which I couldn't really play well. I would never be at concert level at all but I had fun stumbling through them and figuring them out and so on. So that's where I came in and it's been a delight to me that my family have carried that on and again both my sons have been quite serious musicians.

My older son has conducted the Durham Singers in latterly for the last 10 years which is one of the leading amateur choirs in the northeast and that's been just a great delight to see that being carried on through the next generation. Oh and one of the last things I saw them perform was the Christmas oratoria which has wonderful memories for me celebrations with that wonderful opening of the celebration which Bach just gets. This is what Christmas is all about.

Bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, yeah and you can march around to it and feel the joy of Christmas welling up in a way which frankly dare I say a lot of the modern worship songs don't quite. Right yeah yeah well no I think that would be fair. Well I'll tell you what I'll I'll stitch on to the end of this week's podcast just a little phrase or two at least from the Christmas oratoria.

Wonderful. So that'll be the way we end it but before we get there Melissa did want to know any thoughts then on how classical music is meaningful in the Christian worldview and in God's Kingdom. The answer is the answer is read Jeremy Begby, B-E-G-B-I-E.

If you don't know Jeremy Begby's work please do. Jeremy has written at several levels some quite academic treatments about the nature of music, some collected essay collections on music and faith and so on to one of which I contributed after I'd collaborated with a composer on one particular project and Jeremy was involved in that as well. Jeremy is the person at the moment who is really carrying the torch for this whole thing of where music and faith meet and has been really exciting to see his work energizing a new generation of musicians to realize that this isn't just light entertainment around the side of the faith but actually leads you right into the very heart of it in a way that nothing else can.

Absolutely and as we all frequently experience whether we call ourselves Christian or not music does have this transcendent quality doesn't it? Absolutely. It speaks to a part of us that other things don't. Music is its own language and like the sacraments in church it doesn't translate into words.

You can set words to music of course that's a different art but music itself is its own language and we should learn to hear what that language is saying. So yes we bless you Melissa we all the best to you as you can you know pursue your masters in piano performance and know that God can speak through what you're doing. Absolutely.

So good to spend the time with you today Tom very happy Christmas to you and all the family. Thank you and to you and yours as well. Thank you very much and indeed to everyone listening to this podcast as well it's been great to have you with us in this past year and we look forward to bringing you more in the year to come but for now thank you very much and see you in the new year Tom.

Well thank you for being with us for this Christmas edition of the show and I hope that however you're celebrating Christmas you have a very happy one. Next time on the show we're going to be looking at your questions on responsibility as we get towards the new year. How should we honor God through wealth and poverty? Is it okay to have time for ourselves and should we feel guilty about spending money on things like nice holidays for ourselves? Those are some of our questions coming in the final show of the year.

If you are able to support us with a year end giving gift that helps us to make sure that this show reaches many more people all over the world. You can do that from the links both from the USA or from the UK and rest of the world easy ways to give and support the show as we get towards the end of the year and to keep us strong into 2022 as well. Thanks for being with us this year on the Ask N T right anything podcast.

If you want more from the show you can go to askntright.com and why don't we finish with some of the music we mentioned this is barks Christmas oratorio just a snatch of it performed by the choir of Trinity College Cambridge.

[Music]

[Music]

[Music]

[Music]