

Look to the light

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Christmas, 25 December 2011

Isaiah 9.2-7, Psalm 96, Titus 2.11-14, Luke 2.1-20

What a wonderful season Christmas is! The beautiful music in church, the chance to stop and celebrate. Christmas is an endearingly special to many of us — and that often has nothing to do with religion. Christmas at home when I was growing up was not religious at all. It was all about the tree, presents, food and family. I know now the food was not that great (sorry Mum, but we did only ever have orange and onion salad on Christmas Eve, very special :). In fact it never feels like Christmas until I put up the Christmas tree at home. It is an icon of happier family times and all of a sudden all is right in my world.

But an interesting thing about Christmas, at least to me, is the rush of commentary about its Christian, Jewish or pagan origins and what it means today. Atheists, agnostics, journalists, politicians, weather announcers and the local bus driver all get in on the act. In Australia one commentator said, “Well, it’s not a religious celebration any more is it? Only a very few see it in that way don’t they? Most normal people don’t. It’s really about family and giving presents”. Or this one from a group of atheists in America: they paid for an advertisement on billboards. It featured a nativity scene with the words, “Come on you know it’s a myth. Celebrate reason”.

Well as one of the “abnormal, very few” (which I am now going to have on my desk and business card), I would like to say to the commentator who said it was only about family and presents: “What about those who have no family, who come from fractured abusive families or are living at great distances from those they love? What about those whose families fall apart over Christmas and don’t come together at all? What about those who cannot afford to give presents or live in places where anything other than food and water is a luxury they cannot afford? What is Christmas then?”

And I would ask of the atheist who asks me to celebrate reason: “Reason is a good and necessary thing, just ask the philosophers and theologians of the reformation, by all means let’s celebrate it, but are you seriously suggesting that all we need is reason? When has reason ever been pure and perfect, uncluttered by human frailty and weakness? I am sure both Ian Pilmer, Australia’s pre-eminent climate change denier and Tim Flannery, our pre-eminent climate change affirmer, both think they are following reason and so do their followers”.

And I would say to the question of myth: once you have done any degree of serious bible study you will find that the likelihood of events happening exactly as told in the Bible is seriously unlikely, including our well loved story of the birth of Jesus. That is because these stories are not fact as we understand the concept. They are not science or peer reviewed history. The group of atheists in America is right; they are myth, but not myth in the way they would see, as not being true. Truth is something much more than fact and myth. The detail in myth, in ancient stories, reveals eternal truths.

J.R.R. Tolkien, the writer of the Lord of the Rings, was a devout Catholic, an academic and close friend of C.S Lewis. His trilogy of middle earth was fiction through and through yet Tolkien said, “*We have come from God, and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God.*”

He also said, *“All the other myths of the world are a mixture of truth and error — truth because they are written by those made by and for God — error because written by those alienated by God. But the Bible is the one true myth. It is a true accounting of truth, while everything else we do is mimicking”*. The reason his books are such a rollicking success is not because he was a great writer. It is because he named eternal truths: the truths of virtue and vice, goodness and evil.

And so then what is the truth of the Christmas story? The truth of the nativity scene, of the little babe born in Bethlehem? It is about this . . . (light candle) . . . what this symbolises.

It is about the light of God, coming to us in the person of Jesus Christ, first century Jew, resident of Galilee, son of Mary. As the prologue to John wonderfully puts it, *“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it”* and *“the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth”*.

For me the light of Jesus Christ reveals these truths:

That God is love before and beyond anything else. It is love that is creative, compassionate, merciful, passionate, and ever present. That God is one with us and eternally faithful and like the father of the prodigal son rushes to meet us when we turn to him. That God in the gift of himself, in Christ, redeems us from the slavery of our own selfishness, greed and violence, our darkness. That God is gloriously concerned with the outcast, the forgotten, the refugee, the poor and oppressed.

That what God looks for is not success, winning, a full church and a full life, having what we want or think we need but justice, mercy and peace.

This is extraordinarily good news. I mean really, Alleluia! Glory to God! No wonder those angels eternally sing God’s praises. If we seriously trusted and lived by these truths our lives and the lives of others would radically change. With this revelation there is no need to fear anything. With this truth all our darkness is overcome. But this news could only come to us outside of our culture, our systems of power, control and oppression. It could only come from outside our darkness. And that is what the nativity scene with its mythic and factual elements brings home to us.

The little child, born to an ‘abnormal’ family, born of the Jewish nation, on the outskirts of the great Roman Empire, in a dirty, dark, shed with animals and placed in food trough, surely a messy, imperfect business, is the one who is the light, illuminates our darkness and shows us the path to life. When his life and ministry culminated in him standing with the visible wounds from a violent end, in front of his frightened followers and offering them peace and forgiveness, no wonder his followers eyes were opened and they became willing to suffer all for his redemptive message. No wonder his message continues to speak to human beings of every age, even if they recoil from calling themselves Christian or even religious.

Dear people, Christmas must be more than family and presents. It must be a celebration of God’s love and light so we will have hope, courage and purpose for the challenges and joys of life. I pray that, as you gather with friends or family, your hearts will be illuminated by the light of Christ. Look to Christ, the light of your life, for therein is your healing and salvation and peace and justice for all.