

Sermon, Christmas Eve and Day, 2021

All Churches

Readings: Isaiah 9:2-7, Psalm 96, Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Hymns: Once in Royal David's City; While Shepherds watched their flocks by night; Silent Night, Holy Night; Joy to the world; O come all you faithful; Hark the Herald Angels sing.

Given the ongoing success of marketeers, which has seen the so called “Black Friday” sales overtake the traditional Boxing Day sales as the major retail event of the year in Australia, it would seem that my previously “tongue in cheek” suggestion that there will come a day when Australians will celebrate Thanksgiving, in honour of the turkey given by the Gadigal people to Governor Arthur Phillip on his arrival at Sydney Cove, is not perhaps that far-fetched!

In the same vein I read on the ABC website, only late night, a quite disturbing article entitled “Most Australians may doubt that Jesus existed, but historians don't” by John Dickson, an author and historian involved with both Macquarie University and the University of Oxford. In the article Dickson notes “A new survey has found that less than half of all Australians believe Jesus was a real historical person. This is bad news for Christianity, especially at Christmas, but it is also bad news for historical literacy.” He contends that each year as Christmas approaches, the faithful are used to reading stories in the “secular media” providing a take-down of our beloved story. The star of Bethlehem never happened. The three wise men are inventions. And the virgin birth is a typical trope of ancient myth. But such scandalous claims, he believes, are usually interpreted in church circles as clickbait scepticism, and not representative of mainstream Australia.

However, he notes that in a survey just released by the church-friendly National Church Life Survey, their research suggests that Australians are as unbelieving as the media. The 2021 Australian Community Survey asked a representative sample of Australians, “Which of the following statements best reflects your understanding of Jesus Christ?” 22 per cent agreed that “Jesus is a mythical or fictional character”; 29 per cent said they “Don't know” if Jesus lived; and just 49 per cent affirmed that “Jesus was a real person who actually lived.”

Dickson suggests this is, obviously, terrible news for Christianity in Australia for one of the unique selling points of the Christian faith — in the minds of believers — is that it centres on real events that occurred in time and space. Christianity is not based on someone's solitary dream or private vision. It isn't merely a divine dictation in a holy book that has to be believed with blind faith. Jesus was a real person, "crucified under Pontius Pilate", the fifth governor of Judea, as the Apostles' Creed puts it. It would appear many Australians really don't agree, says Dickson.

When I forwarded the link to a friend who is something of a campaigner against "woke" culture, his reply was telling "How depressing! I had somehow just assumed that nowadays the historical fact of Jesus was at least more or less completely accepted. But why should I be surprised if all historical facts are, in our postmodern world, regarded as mere statements of power, and where "objectivity" is mocked more than Christianity!"

However, to the Australian naysayers I direct their attention to another set of figures, which will bring them, and others of similar outlook in the Western World, less joy. In the Western world where consumerism, consumption and the next "fad", have become the substitute for religious and spiritual expression it is worth knowing that while in 2021 it is observed that eighty-eight percent of the world's population identify as religious, it is expected that by 2050 that percentage will have grown to ninety-two percent, due mainly to the growth in numbers of Christians (Africa, South America and China) and Muslims. Buddhist adherents will have decreased dramatically.

Tonight/this morning, we have listened to one of the two accounts that exist in the Bible as to Jesus' birth, and while those of St Luke and St Matthew are not identical, having their own particular emphases, they provide us with significant insight into a moment which is foundational to the Christian story; the remarkable moment when God enters into the affairs of humanity and their relationship with the Divine, by becoming a human baby, so not only to be the Messiah for God's "Chosen People", the Jews, but to be the Messiah for all people of God's world.

St Paul in his Letter to Titus articulates this well by reminding Titus that the Grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people, training them to renounce ungodliness and worldly passion (advice falling on, or not being proclaimed to, many “clogged” Australian ears!), and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives, in their age, as well as anticipating the blessed hope which comes through the coming into the world of our Great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who by coming into the world gave himself for humanity, to redeem it from lawlessness, and to purify for himself a people of his own possession who are zealous for good works.

The Old Testament reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah points strongly to the story of the birth of Jesus, and his subsequent ministry and the witness it fulfils; those who have walked in darkness will be in the light, joy will abound, oppression will be removed, and there will be a place where his government will provide for wonderful counsel, the prince of Peace, and where he will establish peace, justice and righteousness.

As such we are reminded, as we gather in this holy place, of the important truth that Christmas, the birth of Jesus, a glorious and wonderful moment in history, and in our Faith, that it is, but also the beginning of even more glorious and wonderful moments in history, which come as the result of his earthly ministry fulfilled in his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, and the fulfilment of the promise of the Coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, as God establishes the Church, that bizarre organisation/movement which has survived persecution and its own indulgences, foibles and sin, to stand ever before the world as the embodiment of that which is of Jesus Christ, and that which is thereby good.

Might your Christmas be a celebration in which the reality and the glorious hope provided for and anticipated by the birth of Jesus is fulfilled, encouraged and proclaimed.

May each of you and your loved ones be blessed with the joy, peace, love and hope that comes from He who blessed us in his Nativity, historically and theologically.