

ADVENT FAITH

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney by Alan Harper, on Sunday 28 December 2014.

David's sermon on Christmas morning highlighted the belief at the very centre of our Christian faith – “that, in Christ, humanity has glimpsed the heart of God. That in him, the divine has become flesh, walked among us, lived our life and died our death,” if I may quote him.

“Is it true?” he asked. “Is it true?”

Today's reading from Luke is part of this amazing claim.

In keeping with the Law, Jesus' parents take him to the Temple. The old man Simeon, and the prophetess Anna, both identify the baby as God's messiah. He is God's salvation.

Today's cameo is part of a long narrative with which Luke surrounds the conception, birth and boyhood of Jesus. It is full of miracles and divine messengers. We know it all so well. It is the stuff of carols and Christmas pageants. But its role is to state unequivocally that Jesus is the Christ, the very son of God.

We know of course that Matthew tells a different but similar story. Its purpose is exactly the same.

In the ancient world, amazing birth stories were a literary device for emphasising the specialness of great people. Alexander the Great, for example, was said to be a descendent of heroes, his conception was miraculous, and his birth accompanied by great portents. There were even magi involved, although on this occasion, they rued the birth because they knew that this was to be the conqueror of their Asian homeland.

As David said, we should not be distracted by these dubious details of the birth of Jesus. Their literal truth does not matter.

In fact, Mark's gospel, the earliest gospel, has no such narrative, but his certainty about the identity of Jesus is no less for that. His opening words are simple: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God." No fanfare there; just cut to the chase.

What led the gospel writers to such certainty? Why were they so convinced of the amazing identity of Jesus?

And how can we begin to answer that question, "Is it true?"

My grandfather read a lot, and would always read the ending of the book before he began it. He said that knowing the end helped him to fit everything into place when he then read from the beginning.

In the same way, it was knowing the ending of the story of Jesus that so charged the gospel writers with such certainty about who Jesus is.

Because the end of the story, and the central fact of the Christian faith, is the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This may be the season of Christmas, but Christmas and Easter are the complementary bookends which encapsulate the miracle of Jesus Christ. We cannot understand Christmas unless we know about Easter.

Let's be quite clear. Whatever our own doubts and uncertainties may be about the resurrection, among the first generation of Christians, there was no doubt at all that Jesus had risen from the dead.

We may discount particular stories of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, or seek to explain them away, but the fact is that there were many, many genuine witnesses. In fact, in his first letter to the church at Corinth, and writing within a decade or two of the resurrection, the apostle Paul referred to one occasion when the risen Christ appeared to some five hundred people at one time, most of whom were still alive as he wrote. (1 Cor 15:6) It's a bit hard to argue with five hundred witnesses, particularly when many of them could be called on to tell their story.

However, it's notable that, in fact, this particular passage in Paul is unusual; in most of the New Testament, no one sees any need to "prove" the resurrection, or cite witnesses, because everyone knew it to be true. They were themselves surrounded by eye-witnesses. There just wasn't any argument.

A good example of this is Mark's gospel. Most textual scholars agree that it originally ended with the empty tomb. The handful of resurrection sightings now reported in Mark are believed to have been later additions. Why would Mark have finished thus? Simply because he'd told his story. Everyone *knew* what came next. Just as we might finish an account with the words, "And the rest is history." Or, "and you know the rest."

It is also worth considering Paul himself. He was one of the élite. In Jewish circles, he was well connected at the Temple, and had been educated at the feet of the leading Pharisee of the day. But he also had the unusual honour of being a Roman citizen, which carried many privileges. His education extended not just to things Jewish, but also to the Hellenistic culture that surrounded his birthplace, and he knew at least four languages. Why on earth would a man of such standing and advantage give it all up for a life of deprivation, danger and derision?

Why? Because he had not the merest doubt that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead, and in so doing, had proven that he was, as he had claimed to be, the son of God.

I repeat, among the first generation of Christians, there was no doubt whatsoever that Jesus had risen from the dead.

The question was rather, what did it mean? What did it mean?

Paul gives an answer, in fact, the only possible answer. At the beginning of his letter to the Romans (1:4), he says that Jesus "was declared to be Son of God by resurrection from the dead..." It was, of course, not just Paul who realised this truth. It was the inescapable conclusion, a conclusion reached by all the New Testament writers in their own way. Only the divine being, the creator and giver of life, could conquer death.

The most mature, deepest thinker on this matter was the writer of the gospel of John, in that wonderful, thrilling, profound and utterly confounding prologue, which we read with reverence every Christmas. John's great insight, and what we celebrate throughout Advent every year, was that Jesus is, quite literally, God himself. God himself. That in Jesus, God walked among us.

Knowing the end to the story leads us back to the beginning. "Is it true?" Can God really have lived as one of us? The answer is beyond amazing. The answer is so overwhelming that it is beyond us to comprehend it. The answer sends us to our knees in prayers for which we can scarce find the words. Because the answer is "Yes". Yes he did.

We sometimes refer to ourselves as an "Easter people". We are also a Christmas people, or a better phrase would be "an Advent people". The season of Advent is about this miraculous, breathtaking miracle of the incarnation. So let us now stand to affirm this, our Advent faith, in the words of the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father,
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.
Amen