

The Heart of It All

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 2 January 2011, by David Gill. The readings for the second Sunday of Christmas were Jeremiah 31:7-14, Ephesians 1:3-14, St John 1:10-18

For the commercial world, Christmas ended with the close of business on December 24. The St Stephen's choir knew it had survived another festive season when it gasped out its last carol on Christmas Day, croaked its last threefold amen and staggered off for a well-earned break. Most of us felt it was over when the rellies went home, the dishwasher was loaded and we could put our feet up after the last party.

But the church, wisely, says: not so fast. It keeps us in Christmas for twelve days until January 6, the day called the Epiphany of the Lord. I'll talk more about that next Sunday.

For now, we're still marking Christmas, still singing carols, still listening to what the bible has to say about Jesus' birth. So it's no surprise that today's gospel has St John still pondering the mystery of the incarnation – a passage, you will recall, that culminates in the claim: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known”.

I don't know about you, but when I come across those words I usually skip over the first, negative bit to concentrate on the positive that follows. “No one has ever seen God”? – well, we know that, don't we. A statement of the obvious, really. Just common sense. So, ignore it, and focus on what matters: Christ has made him known.

But maybe ignoring the negative statement is a mistake. Maybe, in the present religious climate, we need to hear it afresh, and hear it as warning.

For if the Christian faith is in trouble today – and it certainly is, at least in Europe, North America and Australia – that is not because of attacks on us by people of

other faiths. Nor is it, primarily, because of the very vocal contempt of our secular critics.

It is, I think, the direct result of forms of religious belief that positively invite mockery and rejection. We religious types sometimes can be our own worst enemies, especially when we talk as though we've sussed out the mind of God, as though we have the divine mystery all sorted out, as though we've deleted all life's question marks and replaced them with exclamation marks in bold. When we behave that way, we claim too much.

Christians, along with our Jewish and Muslim cousins, have good reason to be wary of such arrogance. For the Hebrew scriptures, to which all three religions owe much, warn again and again that God is inscrutable, beyond comprehension. The divine mystery, very rarely, may be glimpsed -- but at best from the corner of one's eye, never face-to-face. There are to be no idols, no images of God, and that means philosophical images as well as physical ones. Beware the notion that you've seen God, much less are capable of portraying him.

Leaders of the early church knew the danger. Gregory of Nyssa, a 4th century theologian, warned "Let him who would pry into the mind of God, remember how little he knows of the mystery of the mind of an ant!" A generation later, St Augustine of Hippo offered what would become a much quoted saying: "Si comprehendis, non est Deus" – "If you think you understand, then it's not God you're talking about!" – a warning, incidentally, that should give pause to our secularist friends when they ridicule faith, just as much as to our fundamentalist buddies when they imagine they're upholding it.

To secularists and religious people alike, and to religious fundamentalists of every label – Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, the lot -- the message is: just a moment, life's not that simple. Do not be so sure of yourself. Tread more softly. Listen more carefully. Speak more gently. Wonder more deeply. The mystery at the centre of human existence deserves, from us all, more awe and respect, less arrogance and presumption. Don't pretend to know it all. Nobody knows it all.

For nobody has seen God.

But somebody, Christians claim, has been close to God's heart.

The gospel writer here is using "heart" the way we often do in English as well as some other languages. He's referring not to the red thing banging away in your chest that keeps your blood whizzing round in circles, but to what is at the centre of your existence, what holds you together, what makes you the person you most truly and distinctively are.

Someone has been close to the heart of reality, the heart of the impenetrable mystery pulsing through all things, the heart of the vast silence that surrounds us in life and in death, the heart he dared to call "Father".

Those who knew the man well soon took this claim further. Not only had he been close to the heart of the mystery. Somehow, in a special way -- uniquely, they said -- he lived it. He embodied it. He was the Word made flesh, the eternal in time, God incarnate.

A staggering claim. As the writer Dorothy Sayers once commented: "You may call that doctrine revelation or you may call it rubbish, but if you call it dull then words have no meaning".

Dull it most certainly is not. For if the claim is true, then there *is* light in the darkness, there *is* love in the loneliness, there *is* grace in the emptiness, there *is* meaning in the madness. And there *is* a home, in the heart of God. For you. For me. And for a wandering world whose destiny lies there, waiting, in that stable in Bethleshem.

Be grateful for the love that uttered its own Word, that made itself known, that broke itself open before our wondering eyes. Be grateful for the love that meets us, again and again, here, at the table of the Lord.

Be grateful for the love that accompanies us into this new year. Into all our years. And beyond.

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