

Beyond the Idol of Certainty

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 4 January 2015, by David Gill. Readings for the second Sunday of Christmas were Ephesians 1:3-14 and St John 1:10-18.

Ten days ago, Sydney found itself embroiled in post-Christmas sales – on Christmas Eve! Sometime soon, shops will start telling us there are only 300-odd days to next Christmas. The commercial world follows its own calendar.

So, however, does the Church. As far as we are concerned, Christmas lasts for twelve days and we're still in it. No surprise, then, that today's readings take us again to the mystery of the incarnation.

First, the joyful outburst from the letter to the Ephesians: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ" in such an amazing way. Listening to it, you have the feeling the writer could barely contain his excitement. In the original Greek, today's passage is one long, breathless sentence. The full-stops we have are a gift of the translators. "Blessed be God"

Then, the majestic language of St John's gospel, with its closing words: "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".

Reading that verse, we 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 ignoring the negative statement is a mistake. In our present religious climate, we need to hear it afresh, and hear it as warning.

[But first, a confession. If this sermon has started to sound vaguely familiar, you're right. I did say something similar from this pulpit, a year ago. I'm saying it again because it is important. End of confession!]

The Christian faith, we know, is in trouble – at least in Europe, North America and Australia. Not because of attacks on us by people of other faiths, or by our secular

critics. The hostility we face has a number of causes. Some are complex. Most we can do nothing about.

But there is one contributing factor we can and must address.

The current alienation from the Church and its message is, in part, a direct result of forms of religious belief that positively invite mockery and rejection. We religious types 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, and the world knows it.

I like the comment of Albert Einstein, the great physicist, in an interview with *The New York Times*. "Do not grow old, no matter how long you live," he advised. "Never cease to stand like curious children before the Great Mystery into which we were born". There's the problem. We're losing the curiosity, the wonder.

On Christmas Day I quoted a piece by a young theologian that had just appeared in *The Christian Century* under the intriguing title "All I want for Christmas is the gift of uncertainty". It ended with the words "I want to be led by the God of Mystery, not the Idol of Certainty".

Christians, along with our Jewish and Muslim cousins, have good reason to say Amen to that.

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 includes theological images as well as physical ones. Beware the notion that you've seen God, much less are capable of portraying him.

Some have commented on my tendency, in sermons, to use the word "mystery" when referring to the divine. It's not just me. There is a whole stream of Christian

belief running through the centuries that emphasizes the elusiveness of God and the inadequacy of human utterance.

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 advised “If you think you understand, then it’s not God you’re talking about!” Martin Luther talked about “Deus absconditus,” the God who hides himself.

A decent silence about God is preferable to an over-familiarity. That should give pause to secularists who rubbish God-talk of any kind, as well as to Christian fundamentalists who seem to think simplistic God-talk somehow advances the gospel. It doesn’t.

To religious fundamentalists of every label – Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, the lot – and to antireligious fundamentalists also, 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 the Father’s heart.

The gospel writer here is using “heart” the way we often do. 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, 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. No wonder the writer to the Ephesians was almost lost for words.

It is a staggering claim. As the writer Dorothy Sayers once remarked: "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. 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 waiting in that stable in Bethlehem.

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. Until years will be no more.

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