

Sermon for 4th Sunday of Advent yr B (Christmas Eve 10 am)

Readings

2 Samuel 7.1-11,16

Romans 16.25-end

Luke 1.26-38

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer.

Well we are Almost There – unless you count this afternoon's Childrens' Carols with a Sarah Baker Musical and a Midnight Mass – more than enough for some to fit in on Christmas eve!

But today, because Christmas Eve happens to be a Sunday, you get to have a morning service and a sermon too- lucky you (or not?)!

Coming in to the Centre quite late last Tuesday morning (for a Feet First appointment!), I found myself walking in the opposite direction to some parents with their young people, dressed as, I think, shepherds. I'm pretty sure that they had been to a Nativity here in Church.

The story we've heard from Luke's Gospel must have been re-enacted hundreds, possibly thousands of times in recent days. Parents must have worked on Costume, lines must have been learnt, performances worthy of the Royal Shakespeare Company must have been produced.

Only in Matthew and Luke do we get an account of the Birth of Jesus, and only in Luke in all the detail enacted in Nativity plays, Matthew gives us a much shorter account of the Birth, but does tell us of the Flight in to Egypt and the Massacre of the Innocents. So what of this story, so well loved?

It may, or may not- I don't know which , surprise you, maybe upset you, to know that almost every element of this tale has been subject to scrutiny and questioning, including the reliability of the whole story.

The year it happened seems uncertain - the current 'best guess' seems to place Jesus' birth, slightly illogically, around 4BC in our present reckoning,

When in the year should we mark Jesus Birthday, in the absence of records? It was only in the mid 300's that Christians, now, quite recently, become the 'official' Church, began to celebrate Christmas on the 25th Dec, the Roman date of the Winter solstice.

Was Jesus born of a Virgin ?– the virgin birth has been doubted on grounds both theological and biological, an issue taken up in this book (William Barclay 'A plain man looks at the Apostle's Creed').

What of Joseph – he is usually represented as older than Mary, mainly because he disappears rather quickly from the accounts.

And there's Mary herself – feminist theologians will offer you perspectives on her place in the story, and that of women more widely – if you haven't read and been disturbed by 'Seeking of the risen Christa' then perhaps it's time to take the plunge– seize the moment – or perhaps leave it until the New Year and not spoil the festive season?

and so I could go on, but I fear that we are in danger of getting so involved with questions related to this story, questions to which it seems difficult to give a certain answer which will satisfy all, that we lose the sense of what is happening in the wider context,. What, it seem

to me , we are called to do is to translate the message of the gospels in to our own context – that's what the early church found itself struggling to do, sometimes with difficulty, perhaps why they didn't worry too much over the detail of the Christmas Story.

So we should do no less today. It has been said that empires can cope with Baby Jesus, too small to be a danger, and with the crucified and resurrected Christ, for he can be spiritualised.

What they can't cope with is the living Jesus with his radical demands for Justice and Peace.

It was the late Prof. John Hull , I think, who introduced me to (thought I'm not sure he originated the idea) the Most Significant comma – in the Apostle's creed it comes between 'born of the virgin Mary' and 'suffered under Pontius Pilate' and hides an earthly ministry of radical demands – translated into modern times, they would be about issues like universal credit, food banks, housing justice, sofa surfing, rough sleeping, asylum seekers, Syria, climate change.

So is there truth to be had?

Some would hold that it is there in the Bible – Gospel truth. I remember once offering an opinion that it was very uncertain as to whether or not there was life elsewhere in the universe, only to be told that clearly there wasn't, because if there was, God would have told us in the Bible. I was left to reflect on a very different view of scripture to mine, and that there probably wasn't enough time in life, and certainly not in the group sessions we had left, to try and unpick the subject.

Others would see 'truth' as being a creation of the human mind, something we impose on our view of the world, that there is no Grand Story except the one we each bring.

People like myself, brought up in the sciences, would, I think take the view that there is certainly something like truth, worth seeking, not always immediately obvious, given, easily accessible, but that it can involve time, effort and not a little trouble to approach it. And even then it may provoke differences of opinion, for rarely does the evidence point clearly to one conclusion, and even the questions we ask may grow out of our theoretical perspectives, things we carry with us, perhaps not consciously.

So is there something to which I'm willing to commit myself?

I wondered about the opening of John's Gospel, which Sarah Baker read at the start of our carol service last Sunday, with it's words, so powerful ' In the beginning was the Word.....'

For in Physics there is a view that what is really fundamental is Information – the Word

But on reflection, I decided that John Betjeman's poem 'Christmas', which you may know, has something I would like to say. It's in the last verse:-

No love that in a family dwells,

No carolling in frosty air,

Nor all the steeple-shaking bells

Can with this single Truth compare –

That God was Man in Palestine

And lives to-day in Bread and Wine.

Amen