

A Christmas Sermon – inspired by TIME

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Church of the Ascension, the Anglican Church of Hilton, KZN

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There are many discoveries that we can be very pleased about (even if we take most of them for granted). Included in the list could be the harnessing of electrical charges, without which much of our technological comforts would not exist. And the harnessing of fuels, which gives us motor cars and airplanes, for instance.

But there are other discoveries that are not technological, but have just as revolutionary an effect on how we view and understand life.

I was intrigued to read, in a special feature of TIME magazine of October 4, 2010, how the first nine months of life shape the rest of our life.

It has always been known that what happens in the womb is important. And modern medical technologies have begun to unravel something of the incredible process going on as two cells with different DNA join and begin to multiply in an explosion of growth of billions of cells that, in time, somehow know how to develop into the differentiated cells that make up our brain, our organs, our skin and our limbs etc.

Pregnant mothers have done important things for centuries, trying to keep good nutrition, avoid excessive stress, and do all they could to make the growth environment for their child a good one. Some of that info was based upon superstition, but mostly it was based upon sound instinct and intuition.

And more and more, medical science is revealing just how critical the first 9 months of life are. The article is far more detailed than I can present here – after all, this is meant to be a Christmas sermon, not a presentation of a Pre-Natal Science Paper. But what caught my attention included the following:

A British physician, David Barker, did some studies more than 2 decades ago when his research found that the poorest regions of England and Wales also had the highest incidence of heart disease, esp. the type associated with affluence, not poverty. His conclusions, after extensive study incl. 15,000 case studies, was that pre-natal experience accounted for it. And (to quote TIME magazine), “when he presented his findings [and conclusions] to colleagues, he was greeted with hoots and jeers... ‘Heart disease was supposed to be all about genetics or adult lifestyle factors. People scoffed at the idea that it could have anything to do with intrauterine experience’.”

Another element of the story that grabbed my attention was that others deliberately set out to disprove his study and conclusions. And in doing so, found that they were entirely valid!

Not only that, but the study of “Fetal Origins” as it is now officially referred to, has become the newest and possibly most important field of medical discovery, exploration and research. It is no longer scoffed at but regarded as “mainstream medical knowledge” to be followed and expanded upon. It has amazing potential for how we treat – and prevent – a whole range of human illnesses and defects, including many that only show up decades later in life. The possibilities this newest field of medical research offers are immense, and still to be fully explored.

I could go on, but then that would be to indulgently share with you my fascination with a ground-breaking article that I read, rather than dealing with my task today – to preach a sermon with relevance to our Christmas celebration... So what IS the point of my sharing all this with you?

The birth of Jesus Christ – along with most aspects of his life, death and reported resurrection – has been similarly dealt with over the centuries. Many at the time were very taken with the man Jesus, believing him to be the special Servant of God prophesied long before by prophets and waited for with eager expectation. They concluded this not only from the things he said, but also from the things he did – some of which were literally death-defying that they required people to radically alter their existing understandings and experience of God.

Yet some ridiculed him, and because he did not fulfil every expectation, especially for those who expected him to overthrow the oppressive Roman Empire rule over Palestine, they chose to ignore him as irrelevant to their present needs. Others thought him to be an impostor, or one who was dangerous both religiously and politically, and preferred to have him dispensed with.

Yet 20 centuries later, we are still confronted with the same Jesus, who will not be simply dispensed with. Forget – for a moment, if you can – centuries of some negative experience connected with the person of Jesus and the movements of his followers; the religious bigotry, the hypocritical behaviours of some of his followers, esp. of many of those in positions of power or influence in the institutions bearing his name.

We could rather remember the positive life-changing effects and transformations that have occurred for individuals, groups and even nations, in the name of this same Jesus.

And since soon after Jesus’ death, there were people who tried to ridicule him – perhaps with “jeers and hoots” like that which greeted the British doctor first presenting his research findings. Yet millions more have found that what was claimed by and for this Jesus was not a story of superstition for ignorant people, or a concoction of spiritual mumbo-jumbo in a collective effort to fool lots of people at the same time.

There have been many who set out to dis-prove the story of Jesus of Nazareth. In modern times they have included writers, intellectuals, movie-directors, and scientists. And although some may have been left still preferring to believe that there is no God in the first place, many sceptics have been so convinced that their views and understandings of life and of God have done a 180 degree turnabout.

In the middle of the last century, CS Lewis, an Oxford professor and one of England's greatest minds, was one of them. He was so convinced in the end of the reality of God – not on the basis of some “nice feelings” or a walk in the grandeur of nature, but rather by sound intellectual reasoning and by coming to grips with the claims made by Jesus.

Based on the life of Jesus, he and others have noted that there was no possibility of dismissing the historical claims for his existence and for the reporting on his life, and for the effect this had on immediate and later generations of followers; Only if they equally dismissed all the other claims for people like Julius Caesar and all the other rulers, explorers, writers and philosophers of antiquity, could they similarly dismiss Jesus. And a whole new “field of discovery” sprung up, called “apologetics”, from the Greek word “apologia” which means – not to say sorry – but to give a reasoned defence of something. Not that apologetics was new in itself – but it now had access to modern science, archaeology, and so on, combined with the philosophy of the ages. And nothing that modern science or archaeology can throw up is able to disprove the accounts of Jesus and his remarkable life.

Closer to home and to our time is Professor David Block, formerly a mildly observant Jew, who is a Prof of Applied Mathematics at Wits University and one of the world's foremost Astronomers. His studies of the universe, including of the absolute latest enquiries and studies available to astronomers and physicists, led him and many of his colleagues to have not a hint of awkwardness in proclaiming belief in God. Furthermore, though remaining true to his roots as a Jew, he proclaims belief in Yeshua (the Hebrew name for Jesus), as God's appointed Saviour – and as the single most important character in human history.

It should also be said that he has not a hint of awkwardness in proclaiming God as Creator AND simultaneously proclaiming that the scientific evidence of the Universe being 14.5 billion years old, is accurate. If you read the all-too-frequent letters to the local newspaper by a couple of regular writers, you might think that there are only 2 positions possible: the one that says God created everything in 6 literal days, approx. 6,500 years ago, despite all scientific evidence to the contrary, OR to be an immoral atheist.

Not so – our faith needn't be characterised by such unthinking beliefs that are strangers to the truth of scientific discovery. The irony, in fact, is that it is in scientific discoveries going on that more of the wonders of God's Universe are uncovered – and more of the greatest minds and explorers of the world are able once again to connect with belief. Including belief in Jesus!

And as it always needs to be said, belief in Jesus needs to be more than simply a distant, intellectual statement, but one accompanied by ongoing ‘research’ into who this Jesus was, and still is, and what significance his birth of long ago has for me, living about 60 generations later.

Those are the things we, as a community of faith in Jesus, try to deal with in the days between each annual celebration of his birth. And, for that matter, between each annual celebration of his death and resurrection.

As a community of followers of Jesus – some of us being confident followers and others of us being hesitant or struggling or questioning, no matter – as a community of followers of Jesus, all in different places and stages of life and faith, these are the things we deal with. For this is what adds continued significance to our celebration of Christmas: Not “only” the birth of a baby, spectacular as the birth itself may have been, but what became of that baby, and even before that, the very notion of God identifying with us in such human vulnerability and coming to bridge the gulf between us and God in person, in love, in the beginning form of a baby.

And it’s also ironic that the article I quoted earlier from TIME magazine was all about babies – babies in the womb, in fact. Because Christmas is all about a baby, though focussed on the significance of its life outside the womb. A professor doing research into “Fetal Origins” was initially greeted with hoots and jeers of derision, but later his work came to be regarded as mainstream science backed up by countless further studies, some of them initially conducted by people trying to disprove him. And so too, we have the case of Jesus: Born in a humble way, living a singularly remarkable life, dying a singularly remarkable death, and whose significance for all humanity is still being experienced and wondered at. Not from a scientific distance, but in relationship, in friendship, as God intended from the very beginning.

Happy!

Happy Christmas to you, indeed!