

THE PRE-CHRISTMAS CHRISTMAS SERMON!

Julia Denny-Dimitriou - 14th December 2003

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 2; Phillipians 4:4-9; Luke 3:7-18.

The sermon title was advertised as “The Pre-Christmas Christmas Sermon”, not, as you may think, to catch those of you who will be away, but because I don’t get invited to preach at grand festivals and feasts, so this Third Sunday in Advent is the closest I’ll get to preaching at Christmas!

Seriously, since we are, as we know, in the season of Advent, a time of preparation for Christmas, I thought it would be useful to pause in the midst of all our busyness to remind ourselves what it is we are going to celebrate. With the frenetic round of parties and shopping and planning and cooking and organising for the holiday period it’s not called the “silly season” for nothing. It can be easy to lose a clear focus on what it is we are preparing to celebrate. It is possible to lose sight of the meaning of Advent and Christmas.

So today, I want you to put on your explorer’s pith helmets and pretend that we are missionaries to the uncharted jungles of South America. We have stumbled across a tribe unknown to our so-called civilised world. The tribe has never heard of the Gospel; fortunately they understand English, giving us a chance to explain our God to them. Depending on our explanation they may decide to set us free, or to eat us or sacrifice us to their gods or perhaps both of those. So the quality of our faith presentation is a matter of life and death.

Being good Anglicans, we decide to give them a version of our creeds, since those sum up the essence of our faith. Here goes.....

Oh most gracious jungle dwellers, we believe in a great God who made everything, absolutely everything, in the whole universe. God made all of us people and this beautiful jungle where you live, with its rivers and tall trees, all the animals, birds and insects and the whole world beyond your jungle. This God is so great that we have only brief glimpses of this God, like the flashes of colour you see in birds’ wings when they fly high in the forest canopy. What we know of our God also comes to us from stories that people who knew God before us have recorded, in a book called the Bible.

Even though our God is so great and made everything that there is, things we can see and the things we cannot see, people turned away from God and did not want to worship or to remember God. To remind them not to forget God, God sent special people called Prophets to address them and keep calling them back to worship God.

This went on for a very long time, eventually, God decided to do something really big to catch the people’s attention.

So, God sent a very special person to try and get the people to listen. God sent God’s one and only Son who God loved more than anything else. He was called Jesus, and he came to live among people on earth to call them back to worship God. At first they

welcomed him. He taught the people about God and how much God loved them, showed them what God was like and went about helping people. He gathered a group around him who believed in him and followed him, but most of the people did not want to hear about God, they wanted to carry on as they were, forgetting God and remembering only themselves.

So the people turned against Jesus and conspired with those in power to kill him. He was put to death by the method they used in those days for getting rid of criminals and other troublesome elements – he was hanged on a cross, a method called crucifixion.

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I want to pause from addressing our jungle hosts for a moment to talk to you, my fellow missionaries, and suggest that we are lucky to have got this far in explaining our faith, for when you hear the bald facts summed up like this it sounds like something a script writer for a day time soap would produce! I know that many of you are avid fans of Isidingo, The Bold and the Beautiful, Days of our Lives, Generations so on so I know you are familiar with the fantastical story lines they produce, which require suspension of disbelief at least 3 times in a half hour episode!

By this stage I think our jungle hosts are either falling off their logs laughing so hard or heating up the water for the cooking pots! Whoever heard of a god supposedly all-powerful, who couldn't get the people to listen! Any self-respecting god would just send some well-aimed thunderbolts wipe them out! Or a god who would send part of godself in order to catch the attention of those unruly subjects?

And that is even before the special effects people take over from the soapie script writers! Because now we move on in our narrative tota da.... Resurrection! Yes indeed, kind jungle hosts, we believe that after being crucified, our God's son was raised from the dead. Several people saw him before he returned to God so that we might follow him to be with God also.

And I forgot to mention that other special effects feature, the Virgin Birth! Why yes, we believe that our God's son was born by God's power from a Virgin. And Jesus did special effects stunts himself! He walked on water, healed and even raised people from the dead! And that special power of God at work in our world we call the Holy Spirit so that our God has three parts all rolled into one – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, which we call the Trinity, which means three.

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With that resounding conclusion to the explanation of our faith, I am sure you will agree with me that, to put it in contemporary language – we are toast. Our listeners have long since lost patience with these mad foreigners and filled us with poison darts so that we look like pin cushions.

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Although this has been a somewhat facetious and truncated translation of the Creeds, it sums up the basics of our faith. When you hear it presented like this, I want to say,

“What sensible, rational person would believe this?” It is a quite outlandish, highly unlikely tale, combining all the elements of good fiction, a kind of easy-reading paperback you buy to occupy you on a plane trip.

And yet, this is what we believe. It is what we are preparing to celebrate at Christmas. I said jokingly earlier that the presentation of our faith to the jungle dwellers was a matter of life and death. However, our belief **is** in fact, a matter of life and death. This bizarre story is what we claim to live our lives by, and what we trust will see us into life after death. When you hear it narrated as I have done today, it makes me think we must all be a little bit mad to believe it.

And the best part of all, is that we, products of the Modern Age of rationalism, we who put our trust in Science with a Capital S, we cannot prove most of what we believe. The only thing we can prove from historical records is that a real person called Jesus Christ lived and died on earth some 2000 years ago. That is all. We can prove nothing else.

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I sometimes shake my head and say to God “Do you really expect me to believe all this and encourage others to do the same?” “Do you really expect Christians to risk their lives on this story that reads like a soap opera script?” and it is a risk, because getting involved with God is a risky business. The faith journey is a risky undertaking.

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So where does that leave us as we move through Advent towards Christmas?

I think the answer comes in two parts.

First – the story is so outrageous, so ‘totally over the top’ that it makes me suspect it must be largely true. I say largely because of elements of the story that I struggle with, like the Virgin Birth. And yes, I think we do have to be a little bit mad to believe it, mad with the peculiar madness of love. To stake both life and death on this story of the Carpenter from Nazareth we have to be willing to take the risk that faith demands. The risk that loving involves. Which is, I suspect, just the way God designed it to be. God wants followers who are prepared to risk and to commit themselves and their lives. Believers who are open to a real heart relationship with God. In order to believe the Jesus story, we have to be in love with God.

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The second part of the answer is in people’s personal experiences of God. No matter how much I may struggle with the believing, I cannot deny the demonstrable presence and activity of God in people’s lives throughout the ages. It is real. God is real.

In essence, the Bible is a record of God encountering humanity and humans’ experiences of God. People were so passionate about it, so changed by it, not only staked their lives on believing it, and also recorded it for those to follow.

This is what convinces me, what holds me in faith in faith community, despite uncertainties and difficulties. What persuades me to believe in the Christmas story is God in my life, in the lives of people around me. Passion, excitement “Godencounter” engenders in people for God, for faith in God, for things of God. That is as real as God is.

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To conclude as we started as missionaries, I hope it would be that passion we displayed in our presentation that would not only save us from the pot but persuade our listeners to enquire more about our God.

It’s this passion that God has for us that we are preparing to celebrate in this season of Advent. My prayer for all of us as we move towards Christmas is that God will kindle or rekindle our passion. It will remind us why we can be, and perhaps we once were, excited about God, excited about celebrating God’s coming into the world in the birth of the Christ child.

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