

A Sermon Series for Lent 2024

Sermon 1: Remind me of The Real Jesus

Sunday 25 February: The Second Sunday in Lent

A series of talks focused on Jesus, to lead us through the Season of Lent, into Holy Week and to our celebration of the Resurrection at Easter.

February 25th is exactly 2 months since we wished one another “Happy Christmas”.

In 4 weeks’ time, it will be the start of Holy Week, beginning with Palm Sunday, the day on which we recall the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem to the acclaim of crowds. Because of the things he had been saying and doing, his reputation was huge, and many hoped he would be their messianic king, to throw off the Roman occupation and establish the New Jerusalem.

Yes Jesus came into the city not with an army but on a donkey, a symbol of humility, and he had already signalled that everything was about to change.

He had warned his followers in general. More specifically, to the group of disciples closest to him, known to us as the Twelve Apostles, he spoke about his impending betrayal and death, but they didn’t like what they were hearing, and in some reported conversations, they didn’t comprehend what he was telling them.

(Ref. today’s Gospel Reading, Mark 8.31-38.)

In four-and-a-half weeks’ time, it will be the day we refer to as Good Friday. I need not remind us of the focus of that day. We call it Good Friday, but we don’t walk up to people and say, “Happy Good Friday”. There are excellent theological reasons to do that, but it sounds strange. Even if we did say it, we probably wouldn’t say it in the same way that we wish people “Happy Christmas”.

In a dramatic switch just 2 days later and 5 weeks from now, we will be saying “Happy Easter” as we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus.

In just a few months, we go from Christmas to Easter, covering significant events in the life of Jesus: Born in Bethlehem, raised as a refugee child in Egypt after escaping from the murderous King Herod, raised to adulthood in Nazareth, with a ministry spread widely in that region, before his crucifixion in Jerusalem and reported resurrection from death.

There is much about God that is unknowable and about which we cannot be certain. But for at least one person, there was no doubt that she knew about God!

A young girl, talking with her grandmother, said, “Granny, do you know how you and God are both the same?” “No, my dear” said the surprised grandmother, “in what way is that so?” The young girl replied: “You’re both so old!”

Certainly, God is very old. Older than you and me, older than the hills, as they say! Yet we have been shown so much that we can know, especially in the life and person of Jesus whose death we’re preparing to commemorate soon and whose resurrection we will once again celebrate at Easter.

This short series is focused on some aspects of Jesus who demonstrated what God is all about: **Grace** ... a wonderful all-embracing term to highlight the extent of God’s love for us. It is often explained as “God’s goodness, undeserved and unearned”. The writer Philip Yancey expresses it like this – you’ll have heard me say it before:

There is nothing we can do to make God love us more.

There is nothing we can do to make God love us less.

When the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci went to China in the 16th century, he took samples of religious art to illustrate the Christian story for those who had never heard it. The Chinese readily adopted portraits of the Virgin Mary holding her child. But when he produced paintings of the crucifixion and tried to explain that the God-child had grown up only to be executed, people reacted with revulsion and horror. They much preferred the Virgin and child to the crucified God.

In the accounts of the life of Jesus as told by Luke and Matthew, one person seems to grasp the mysterious nature of what the Christ-child had in store, of what God had set in motion. The old man Simeon encountered the baby one day in the Temple, and recognized this child as being the long-awaited and promised Messiah. He instinctively understood that conflict would follow.

“This Child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against”. Although on the surface little had changed – the autocrat Herod still ruled, Roman troops were still hanging Jewish patriots for acts of rebellion, and Jerusalem flowed with beggars from surrounding conflicts – somehow Simeon sensed that underneath, everything had changed.

At first Jesus hardly seemed a threat to those powers. He was born under the rule of Emperor Augustus at a time when there was high hope in the Roman Empire. More than any other ruler, Augustus raised the expectations of what a leader could accomplish and what a society could achieve.

It was Augustus who first borrowed the Greek word for good news – Ευαγγελιον – (pronounced Evangelion) and he applied it as a label for the new world order represented by his reign. (We use the word “gospel” in English, but are familiar with

evangel ~ism ~ical which stem from evangelion, even if their meanings have changed or been perverted in recent decades.)

The Roman Empire declared Augustus a god and established ways in which it was appropriate to worship him. Many believed that his enlightened and stable regime would last forever – a final solution to the problems of government.

Meanwhile, in an obscure corner of the same empire, the birth of a Jewish baby named Yeshua was overlooked. We know about Yeshua (or Jesus as we say in our language) mainly through four books written about him some years after his death.

Quoting from Yancey: The Jesus I Never Knew (Part One: Who He Was):

“Jesus positioned himself as a dividing point in history. He made audacious claims. The gospels portray him as a very interesting character, one who enjoyed wine and food and frequently attended parties; some also thought of him as a trouble-maker, a disturber of the peace. Yet he scorned fame and material excess.

“Obstinacy frustrated him. Self-righteousness (especially from religious leaders) infuriated him. Simple faith thrilled him. He seemed more emotional and spontaneous than the average person, not less. The more we study Jesus, the more difficult it becomes to pigeonhole him.

“He said little about the Roman occupation, a major topic of conversation among his countrymen. But he took up a whip to drive petty profiteers from the Jewish Temple. He urged obedience to the Mosaic Law, while acquiring the reputation of a law breaker. He could show huge sympathy for a stranger, yet he turned on his best friend with a rebuke, ‘get behind me Satan’ (using the Hebrew word, not meaning the Devil, but meaning one who accuses). He had uncompromising views on rich men and loose women, yet both types were attracted to his company.

“The Christian writer Walter Wink said that if Jesus had never lived, we would never have been able to invent him.”

Since Jesus came to reveal God to us, what are some of the things we can know about God from his life? Here are just a few of them... (The Jesus I Never Knew, Part One, Section 2: “Birth: The Visited Planet.”)

We learn that Jesus was humble

Unimaginably, the maker of all things shrank down, down, down, so small as to become an ovum. A single fertilized egg invisible to the naked eye that would divide and re-divide until a fetus took shape, enlarging cell by cell inside a nervous young mother, since Mary at marriageable age in her society would not have been like a contemporary career-woman in her late 20s or 30s.

We learn also that God is approachable

In many religions there is a sense of God as one who is to be feared. We have that also, in its rightful place, and also in the Jewish faith... and be reminded that Jesus was a Jew... there was a great sense of fear of God, in the sense of awe: God was not someone simply to be walked up to and slapped on the back to say, "G'day mate".

But people approached Jesus with ease, even those on the fringes of society, and knew they were welcome in his presence. You did not have to be important in the hierarchy of society to have an audience with him.

We learn too of God's concern for the underdog

As we read the birth stories about Jesus, we can only conclude that although the world may seem tilted in favour of the rich and the powerful, God is tilted toward the underdog.

As Mary said in her magnificent hymn, he has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.

And we learn that God is courageous

It took courage for God to lay aside power and glory and to take a place among human beings, who greeted him with the same mixture of a haughtiness and scepticism that many still express today.

It took courage to risk descent to a planet known for its clumsy violence, and among a tribe known for rejecting its prophets. GK Chesterton wrote that, alone of all creeds, Christianity has added courage to the virtues of the creator. The need for such courage began with Jesus' first night on earth and did not end until his last.

We keep silence.

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### **Let us pray:**

Lord Jesus, in the gospels, we are shown your responses to people. Those responses provide us with a glimpse into the heart of God. You are the one who comes near to us. Your style is to shower people with mercy and grace, so much so that we find it hard to come to terms with it.

Yet that is your big-hearted, open-handed manner, also demonstrated to us through the gospels. Open our spirits, Lord, to enable us to understand your gracious nature and to see more clearly into the heart of God. Amen.

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