

St.Aidan's West Epping, 25th December 2018

CHRISTMAS: WHO CAN WE TRUST?

(Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-8a; John 1:1-14)

When I mentioned to Bishop Ross the other day that I was thinking about my Christmas Day sermon, he commented that for him, the big issue of the past year was people's loss of confidence in those who have leadership and authority. Of course, he is right. We look at our political leaders in Australia, and we see more interest in plotting against each other than focussing on what is best for our nation. We see politicians who seem more interested in getting easy votes here and now, in short-term and inadequate decisions, rather than considering the important issues for our people's future. We so often hear what I might call "weasel words", words that I don't trust. We see moral failures; we see the encouragement of fear and prejudice rather than compassion; and so often we see decisions that seem to benefit big business and potential donors, instead of seeking the welfare of ordinary people, especially people in need.

And yet, by comparison with the rest of the world, Australia seems not to be doing too badly. Many of us are appalled by what we see happening in the not very United States. We see the potential for disaster with Brexit in the UK. We see violent protests in the streets of Paris, and division in Europe as to how to respond to the overwhelming refugee crisis.

And then we see countries that are supposed to be democracies whose leaders are acting more and more like dictators, while we see little real progress towards peace and justice where there is conflict and oppression. And not surprisingly, people who have authority in other settings also use their power in wrong ways: we've heard about film producers and actors; about doctors and counselors; teachers and parents; clergy and supposedly Christian leaders, who have abused their power. Who can you really trust?

That's a happy start to a Christmas Day sermon, isn't it? But I don't think it is too far from the truth. We have lost confidence in our own leaders, and we have little confidence in the leaders of so many other countries. And it seems to be harder and harder to find people we can really trust. No wonder we are concerned about what the future holds. What has gone wrong?

The problem is basically that all these leaders are sinful human beings like the rest of us! One of the beautiful things about the Christmas story is that it seems to take us away from these things. Perhaps part of the attraction of Christmas with its decorations and carols and presents and feasting, and its lovely stories, is that it distracts us from the realities of life. Even so, Christmas is often a stressful time because it exposes so many to difficult realities of life, especially the tensions of family life and relationships.

If we look at the Christmas story, we will actually see that it is not as pretty as those beautiful Christmas cards suggest. A young woman, virtually still a girl, not yet officially married, has to make a lengthy forced journey even though she is pregnant, close to giving birth. Mary is probably relieved to get away from the comments and disapproval of neighbours and relatives. But when she and Joseph arrive at Bethlehem, it is still a battle to find anywhere to rest and to safely give birth. Perhaps they have to make do in a dark cave. If it is in a stable, it is certainly not carefully cleaned, swept and sanitized. Perhaps more likely it is a corner of a distant relative's house, in a space hastily organized, with an animal's feeding trough quickly cleaned up so that it can be used as a cradle. Not all that charming when you think about it!

But that's what the world is like. It is peopled by very fallible human beings, and people have always been finding themselves in difficult situations: sometimes they might seem to deserve it, sometimes it will be through circumstances beyond their control.

This is the story Christians have been celebrating for nearly 2000 years. Of course we only know some basic details. Luke, who tells us about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, gives us information that places it during the time of Herod the Great. However the scholar of the 6th century whose calculations were officially used to calculate the date of Jesus' birth, made a small mistake. Luke tells us that Jesus was born before the death of Herod about 4BC: so our AD count of the years is actually a few years out.

At least some Christians were celebrating the birth of Jesus on December 25th even during the 1st century, although we have no real evidence about the actual date of his birth. December itself is pretty unlikely: shepherds and sheep weren't likely to be out in the fields at night at that time of year!

The 25th December became more widely celebrated by Christians, from the 4th century onwards: the date was probably symbolic. It was the time of the winter solstice: after the solstice, the days of course become longer, and the power of light seems to assert itself. And the birth of Christ **is** like the coming of new light into the world. John in our Gospel reading tells us that through Jesus, light began to shine in the darkness of the world. The world tried to extinguish that light, but it did not succeed.

While Luke takes us to the beginning of the historic story of Jesus, through his birth in Bethlehem, John brings us a much bigger theological picture. He takes us back to the very beginning. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”, writes the author of Genesis. But John, the writer of this Gospel begins by saying “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.”

In Genesis, God spoke, and there was light, there was the firmament and the sea and dry land. God spoke, and fish and birds and animals came into existence, and the first human beings were created. God spoke: that word which was in the beginning was the creative word of God. The Word was God expressing himself and his will and his creative power. And in our passage, John wants us to see that the Word is not simply a set of verbal utterances: the Word is personal. It is the Word of God, the Creator of the world, who has actually come into the world, and entered into the life of the world. Jesus himself is the Word of God, that Word who is with God, and who **is** God.

Even though he is guided by the Spirit of God, John can only communicate his message to us using human words; and to understand the depths of the very being of God is of course beyond us. But he points us to the reality that in Jesus, God himself has actually come among us, experiencing human life with its joys and its challenges. **If we want to see what God is like, we need to look at Jesus.**

Sadly the world we know today is not really much different from the world that Jesus knew. People in power had their own agendas then, just as they do today. Jesus was a threat to their agendas, and those people in power got rid of him. But their power was only human power, and the power of God ultimately had the true victory over sin and evil and death.

So here we are in this troubled world 2000 years after the birth of Jesus. Many people, even many people who do not claim to be religious, claim to admire Jesus and see him as a worthy teacher and guide. But Jesus didn't seek admiration: his birth in difficult circumstances led to a life in which he had no real home; a life in which he was loved not by the wealthy and powerful, but by the humble and the outsiders; a life which culminated in a horrific execution; a life which was not ended by that execution, for he rose from the grave, triumphant over death.

Those who knew and understood Jesus most clearly came to see that he was a man of truth, and that his message was indeed the truth. People came to trust and follow him. They found that his life and his deeds were consistent with his message; that he could be trusted to tell the truth about God and about life; he could be trusted to show people the way to live, and the way to true and eternal life; in fact he could be trusted to give us in his grace the gift of eternal life.

This helpless baby born in Bethlehem so many years ago is the promised Saviour of all people. He is the living Word of God. He is the way, the truth and the life. He is the one we can indeed trust. This Christmas, may we renew our trust in Jesus, the living and true Word of God. May we renew our commitment to him who is the true Lord and King of creation. And may we renew our confidence in him who was born and lived, who died and rose for us, and who brings us true hope for the future and indeed for eternity. Amen.

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