

The True Christmas

1. Christmas Untruths

- I heard the story recently of a small boy who was rather put out at not being chosen in his preferred role in his school's nativity play
 - He was given the part of the Innkeeper and not Joseph
 - And so he planned his revenge
 - If he wasn't going to have the lead part, then he would ensure he would be remembered for other reasons
 - The great day arrived, the parents, families and friends were gathered
 - He stood at the door of his inn and Mary and Joseph approached
 - There was a knock and the question was asked "Have you any room at the Inn"
 - And in a stroke of acting genius ... he threw the door open and announced
 - "Yes! There is plenty of room here. Please do come in. You can have the best ensuite bedroom"
 - True story ... it really happened!
- Revising the events of history has been common practice over the years to suit the political or personal agendas of those involved
 - The Nazi's did with their book burning
 - Hollywood producers do it to make movie plots more appealing
 - And Christmas card illustrators make a living from it
- Even once you strip back all the commercialisation of Christmas ...
 - there are still elements of the Christmas story that have been revised ...
 - or just simply misunderstood, ignored or forgotten
- To make the point, I'd like us to do this little quiz so you can test yourself to see just how well **you know** the Christmas story ... and to what extent you've been duped by the revised versions of Christmas we see portrayed on our Christmas cards and in children's nativity plays

1. Joseph and Mary were told to go to Bethlehem by...
 - A. An angel
 - B. A prophet
 - C. The Roman Emperor**
 - D. Their doctor

2. They travelled to Bethlehem with ...
 - A. Mary on a donkey
 - B. Both Mary & Joseph on donkeys
 - C. State rail
 - D. No one knows**

 3. What did the innkeeper say to Joseph and Mary?
 - A. You should have booked
 - B. There is no room in the inn
 - C. You can have the stable
 - D. Both (b.) and (c.)
 - E. No one knows**

 4. Which animals were present at Jesus' birth?
 - A. Sheep and cows
 - B. Donkeys and camels
 - C. Lions and tigers
 - D. No one knows**

 5. How many wise men were there?
 - A. Two
 - B. Three
 - C. Four
 - D. No one knows**

 6. The wise men found Jesus in...
 - A. The stable
 - B. The inn
 - C. A house**
 - D. A pram

 7. What did the angels sing above the shepherds?
 - A. "Joy to the world"
 - B. "Jingle bells"
 - C. "Glory to God"**
 - D. The Hallelujah Chorus
- Hand up anyone who got 7 from 7? 6? 5? 4?

- Point is ... as familiar as we are with the Christmas story ... for many of us it is a mixture of truth and tradition > of fact and fiction
- So my aim this morning is to go back to the original historical record of the birth of Jesus as told by Dr Luke, an educated man
 - And take an unrevised look at facts of Christmas and their meaning
- As we do so I'd like us to note three things ...
 - This is history - we need not doubt it
 - This is royalty / divinity - we dare not patronise it
 - Here is humility - we should not sentimentalise it

2. History – need not doubt it

- First thing to note is that Luke is writing history
- Luke was not one of the disciples of Jesus
 - It was likely that Luke was commissioned to go and conduct his own investigation and write an account of Jesus life on behalf of a rich benefactor called Theophilus
 - **Luke 1:1-4** *Many have attempted to put together an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as these things were passed on by those who from beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the message. ³ For this reason, it seemed good to me as well, having investigated everything thoroughly from the start, to write something orderly for you, Most Honourable Theophilus. ⁴ My aim is that you may know the certainty of the message were taught.¹*
- It's clear Luke has interviewed those who were eye witnesses ... such as Jesus' mother and others, as well as those commissioned by Jesus himself to hand down the facts and meaning of Jesus life such as the disciples
- This is really significant for giving us confidence in the historicity of Jesus
 - Luke was not one of the insiders
 - He didn't have an agenda or personal mission to maintain
 - He has come in from the outside to do the work of an impartial investigative historian and "to write something orderly ... that you may know the certainty of the message were taught"
- In addition to this, it is clear that as you read the opening chapters of Luke's account of Jesus life ... that you are actually reading history

¹ The Essential Jesus

- Luke was writing history
 - 1:5 > Luke places Jesus birth in the time when Herod the Great was king in Judea
 - 2:1 [p11] > during the reign of Augustus Caesar ... arguably the greatest and most powerful of the Roman Emperors²
 - 2:2 > he tells us Quirinius is the local governor of Syria who is overseeing the Roman census of the time
- Not only were each of these rulers men whom history records, but the years in which they were in office overlap to the confirm for us that the time of Jesus birth that Luke is recording, happened in history a little over 2,000 years ago
- In addition, given historical fiction only came to prominence as a genre of writing in the C18th ... you would have to take an enormous leap of faith to believe that the gospel writers invented a form of writing that didn't appear anywhere else in the world for a further 1700 years
- This is history ... and the gospel writers are writing down the facts
- It's possible for modern day commercialism to treat the birth of Jesus as though it is just a lovely story from antiquity with little or no credibility
 - However, the story of Jesus is not like
 - Robin Hood and his Merry Men or
 - King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table
- **Illustration – John Dickson**
- PhD in Ancient History
- He teaches the Historical Jesus at the University of Sydney and is an Honorary Fellow of the Department of Ancient History at Macquarie University
- Responding online to a book that came out recently de-bunking the historicity of Jesus
 - *"I will eat a page of my Bible if someone can find me just one full Professor of Ancient History, Classics, or New Testament in an accredited university somewhere in the world ... who thinks Jesus never lived."*

² 31BC-14AD

- In other words what we see here in Luke's gospel and what historians like John Dickson affirm, it's actual, factual history
 - Real people
 - A real journey
 - A real destination
 - A real point in history

- **Application**
- Important for us today know this when so many are sceptical of religious truth
 - We read Dan Brown's novels that mix truth with fiction
 - Watch the latest Discovery Channel documentary that tells us Jesus was married with 6 kids and drove a people mover
 - Latest scholarly paper claims that Jesus was merely a figment of his followers imaginations³

- The result is a muddled version of the truth that doesn't make sense ...
 - And so many end up dismissing Christianity and the message of Jesus as the stuff of fairytale and myths
 - And often we do so without taking the time to look at the historicity that underpins the truth of the Christian message

- However, when we take just a moment to look with open eyes and listen with open ears to the truth about Jesus as presented by those who were eye witnesses and who investigated the life of Jesus IN HIS TIME ...
 - Well, we'll see we have something that is built on the solid foundation of history that we really can base our life on for all eternity and nothing can sweep it away

- This is history - we need not doubt it
 - So I want to encourage you to take away the Essential Jesus that you received when you arrived and we read from this morning
 - Take it home and read it this week
 - You may not have ever done that before ... but as you do ... ask yourself "who is this man?"
 - If you have any questions, you might like to call or email me and I'll shout you a coffee or a beer and we can talk chat about any questions you might have

³ John Dickson's summation of Richard Carrier's book – On the Historicity of Jesus

3. Royalty – we dare not patronise it

- All through Luke's account he emphasises the royalty or should we say, the divinity of Jesus
- This is stated most clearly in the words of the angel to the shepherds there in middle of page 12 where the angel says to the
 - *"Today, a Savior has been born to you in the city of David. He is Christ the Lord."*⁴
- City of David is the town of Bethlehem
 - Known as the City of David because it was the birth place of King David, the great OT king
 - Therefore it was known as the city of royalty
 - Like Windsor or Balmoral might be in UK
- Christ
 - NT word for Messiah
 - God's specially chosen anointed king
- Lord = Lord

- So we're talking royalty here

- This ties in with what the angel announced to Mary [1/3 way down pg 9]
 - **Luke 1:32-33** ³² *He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David.* ³³ *He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and his kingdom will never end."*

- What these angelic announcements tells us is that God had promised his royal ruler hundreds of years earlier before the birth of Jesus
 - He told us precisely where he would be born
 - And precisely what he was to do

- And he tells us
 - that this king will have an everlasting rule
 - that it would never be destroyed
 - that he would eventually overthrow everybody and everything that stood against him
 - His reign was to be over all nations, languages and peoples

⁴ Essential Jesus page 12

- And so what we're being told by Dr Luke is that on that first Christmas day, is that this promised king has arrived in the birth of Jesus
- Mankind has seen many, many reigns of man ... anyone with a passing interest in history knows that
 - Babylonian empire
 - Persian
 - Greek > Alexander the Great
 - Roman > Caesars
 - British Empire
 - Third Reich
 - Soviet Union
 - All once mighty human empires ... that have been and gone
 - They rose to power ... and then they crumbled and fall
- Unlike the frail, crisis ridden kingdoms of man, the kingdom of Jesus stands forever
 - He will be great and his kingdom will never end
 - He is Christ - the Lord
- We dare not patronise him
 - We must bow the knee before him
- Whoever you are, where ever you come from ... Jesus divine kingship demands your submission
 - He is God's king
- **Illustration – Nativity Scene**
- We have this lovely Willow Tree nativity scene that sits on our front table at home
 - It's a great reminder for us as a family during Advent that Christmas is coming and what we're preparing to celebrate ... the coming of God's king
 - However ... come early January ... we'll wrap it back up in its tissue paper and put all the figurines back in the box and put it away for another 11 months
- I wonder if this is the attitude that many of us have towards Jesus
 - That yes, he comes out for a little while at Christmas, out of the tissue paper and into the crib
 - And then a couple of weeks later ... he's wrapped back up and put away, out of sight, out of mind

- If what the angel says is true, we dare not patronise him like that
 - We must submit to him
 - For he is God's anointed king

4. Humility – should not sentimentalise it

- History, royalty > finally, humility
- There is great irony in the birth of Jesus, for even though he comes as God's anointed king ... he comes in great humility

- Easy to lose the humility of Jesus birth in the modern day portrayal of Christmas cards and nativity plays
 - The angels are normally dressed in white with cute little wings
 - The shepherds look like sheiks from UAE
 - Mary looks lovely as she gazes into the eyes of a plastic baby
- There is
 - No manure
 - No screams or cries from the unassisted birth of a teenage bride
 - No rats in the stable

- **Illustration – Prince George**
- When William and Kate had baby George ... he became 3rd in line to be the King of England
 - Where was he born?
 - In a stable with rats, manure and a feed trough?
 - Of course not ...
 - Born in St Mary's private hospital
 - With best obstetricians, mid wives and technology in the country
 - No expense spared
 - After spending their time there in a private room ... Kate and George left in a \$200,000 Range Rover to go back to Kensington Palace

- But God's king is born where?
 - In a stable!
 - The king of the universe had the most humble of births

- There is a pattern of humility established there at his birth in the stable ... that was to be the pattern of his whole life ... right through to his humiliating death on the cross
- Why did he do that?

- Why did he humble himself, give up his heavenly throne, come to earth as a baby and then go to the cross?
 - Answer is in the angel's announcement on page 11 and it's the whole point of this passage and the whole reason Jesus was born at all
 - *Today, a Savior has been born to you in the city of David. He is Christ the Lord.*⁵
 - Jesus Christ was born to be our saviour
 - Not to be the centre of attention in nativity plays
 - Not even to be an example to us of how to live a good life
 - He came to save us

- Why did he need to do that?
 - Because as the angels sang in the next paragraph
 - He needed to bring peace on earth between humankind and God

- Whether you and I can see it or are ready to admit it ... the reality is we have all failed to treat God as he should be treated
 - Over and over again we push God to the periphery of our lives so we can get with living the life we want as though God doesn't exist

- I don't know about you ... but for me personally, just this week I have
 - Been proud, arrogant, harsh, unforgiving, heartless, lustful, self-absorbed, greedy

- I have been
 - Prayerless, godless, self-sufficient and faithless
 - And that's just this week

- And I think everybody, unless they are extraordinarily blind or extraordinarily full of themselves, will have to admit, that their relationship with God is also not as it should be

- And because of that we lack peace with God > we have broken the relationship with God and we desperately need to be reconciled

- **Illustration – Broken marriage**

- Those of you who are / have been married
 - When you have falling out with your spouse over something, big or small, the relationship is broken > there is no peace
 - It needs reconciling

⁵ Essential Jesus page 12

- Jesus Christ, came in humility to reconcile you and I to God > to bring us peace with him
- **Illustration - Martin Turgeon**
- On June 5 1978, 7 year old Martin Turgeon slipped off the wharf and fell into the Prairie River
 - The dozen or so adults standing on the pier did nothing – except watch him struggle a few moments in the water and then drown
- Why didn't anyone help?
 - Just a short distance upstream, untreated sewerage is dumped into the river
 - The water is highly polluted and very smelly
- One witness quoted an onlooker as saying
 - "We weren't going to jump in there, the water is much too dirty."
- A policeman who came on the scene shortly thereafter remarked bitterly,
 - "It makes you wonder how human people really are. The boy probably could have been saved."⁶
- By contrast however, God looked at our dirty world full of godlessness, greed, pride and selfishness
 - He saw us drowning in the mess we have made of our lives and he dived into our world – born as a baby
 - In order to come to save us ... by going to the cross to bring us peace with God
 - It's no wonder that the angels sang "*Glory to God in the highest* "
- Humility - we must not sentimentalise it
 - The humility of Jesus birth points us to his humiliation on the cross
- Because Jesus is a humble king
 - It is perfectly safe to submit our lives to him
 - As humble king ... he's not like other worldly rulers
 - He's not a ruthless dictator like Caesar, Henry VIII or Kim Jong-un
 - He came
 - Not to laud it over us, but to serve us
 - Not to enslave us, but to free us
 - Not to stand over us, but to stand beside us

⁶ Redeeming the past, David Seamands

- The humble king who loves you, breaks into this world in order to serve you and die for you

5. Conclusion

- My prayer for all of here this morning is that would all see the truth of Christmas and not lose it in the midst of commercialisation, fiction and tradition
- The truth about Christmas is
 - Grounded in history – we ought not doubt it
 - Points to royalty / divinity of Jesus – we dare not patronise it
 - Reveal his humility – we should not sentimentalise it
- If you are here this morning and you have questions or realise there's things didn't know about Jesus ...
 - Encourage you to take the Essential Jesus with you
 - Story of Jesus written for us by Luke
 - Take the time to read it these holidays so you can know the truth about Christmas based on the historical records
 - Rather than based on ignorance, fable and fiction
- In the new year, we will be running a Life of Jesus course
 - Tell you more about that later

PRAY