

19.12.21 Carols by Candlelight - sermon

Good evening!

If I were to start by saying 'Once upon a time' ... you would know that I was about to tell you a fairy story. If I were to start by saying ..'There was an Englishman , and Irishman and a Scotsman' then you would know I was about to tell a joke.. but trust me, you don't want to hear my jokes!

The Christmas story doesn't start like either as these. In Luke chapter 2 it starts... 'In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world' and he adds for good measure that Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Emperor Augustus was a real person, and he rules over the entire Roman empire between 31 BCE – 14 CE....quite a long time for a Roman emperor!

And it was clear that this census was really important to Augustus - it is recorded in other historical documents, that when he died, he had the hand written results of the census with him on his death bed – The census showed him how important he was, how powerful he was.

Anyway, Luke included these historical details because he was absolutely convinced, that the story, he was telling, was real. Quirinius was a real governor, Augustus was a real emperor and the census really happened. Luke was making the point for anyone who would read his words, that what took place, actually happened.

We all know the Christmas story, Jesus a very special baby, born in a manger, the shepherd's visited by angels and the wise men who brought Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh....Great story! but do we believe it? Or do you consider it make-believe, just a fairy story.?.. or maybe, you think it's a bit of a joke?

We hear the Christmas story and sing wonderful Christmas Carols every year. And for many that's all it is, a great tradition. But why is it, that for some people, the words of the carols and the whole Christmas story are more than that, more than mere words... Why is it for some they become a belief that they build their lives on?

And so, I reflected on what it took for me to believe.
And it came down to 3 things..

Firstly, I need to be intellectually convinced. I needed a faith that would stand up to scrutiny.
Secondly, I need to see that faith works, that Jesus makes a difference. Otherwise, what's the point?
And thirdly, I need to experience something supernatural, something that is beyond myself and this world, otherwise it could just be a man-made religion.

And what fascinates me about the Christmas story is that all three of these things, are there.

There were people who had an intellectual journey to faith
We see that Jesus made a difference to people's lives
and we see people who had a supernatural experience.

The Magi, these were the Babylonian astrologers – they were the intellectuals of their day – they were incredible mathematicians - they could plot where the stars would be and when a star appeared that wasn't expected and hung over somewhere longer than expected, they had to go and explore.

And so driven by intellectual pursuit, they set out on a journey and found Jesus. And like all intellectual journeys of faith, it was a long journey, it took time.

I remember in my journey to faith. I reckon I was a nightmare. I would ask all the difficult questions and loved to see the teacher's squirm. My background is in medicine- I was a doctor for many years, before becoming a priest and I needed to understand.

Fortunately, I had a very gracious teacher, who didn't tell me what an idiot I was, and helped me find some answers. It was a challenging. It made me think and there are still things I don't fully understand.

But it isn't just about head knowledge – I needed to see that faith makes a difference in the world. From day one, we see Jesus turning social conventions upside down. He was born to a woman who wasn't married, and that was ok. He fought for the poor and the marginalised. He championed women & children.

For me, I had the privilege of going to Uganda a few years ago with the youth group from church – and we saw, first hand, many stories of how God provided, how God blessed the poorest of the poor.

We met an amazing lady called Penninah. She lost her father at the age of 12 - He had worked tirelessly to pay for her school fees. But when he died, she had to drop out of school. She had no hope, the chances of getting a reasonable job were remote. But she prayed, she trusted God, and she was convinced that it was God who provided her a job, as a gardener - and with the money she earned from this, she went back to school and she trained as an accountant and eventually she became the principal of the Mothers Union in a town called Rukingeri in Uganda and there, she passed on her knowledge to other women, who were then also were brought up out of poverty. She says...a quote from Penninah...

God has changed my life, and I want others to know his love and do everything I can to encourage school drop-out and orphans.'

This is faith in action.

And finally, the last thing I need to have real faith is I need to have supernatural experiences.

In the Christmas story, supernatural experiences are all over the place. Take the shepherd – the thugs of the first century – when the Angels appeared to them, in one profound spiritual, experience, they were convinced that God's son had been born. They believed in a moment.

For me, it wasn't quite so dramatic! My first experience of the supernatural was when I was going through a hard time following the death of my nephew. Someone prayed with me, and as they did, a huge wave of peace overwhelmed me, almost like a big virtual hug from God. Weird, but wonderful.

I'm still waiting to see a host of angels, but that was what I needed to know that God is real.

So, for me, historical facts and grappling with the difficult questions, seeing faith in action and supernatural experiences were what I needed, to be convinced that the Christmas story is true.

People, journey to faith, in many different ways. It's the destination and not the route that's important. But, today, let's remember that 2000 years ago, a light shone over Bethlehem and a light came into the world and Jesus invites us to step into his story. A story which I am convinced is neither a fable nor a joke.

Amen.