

Beyond the Stories

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney, at a service of lessons and carols, on Christmas Eve 2011, by David Gill

We have been hearing again the sacred stories, revelling again in the sacred songs.

But now, pause a moment. Pause, and wonder at what lies beyond the stories, at what inspires those songs. Pause to contemplate the deep mystery at the heart of the Christian faith.

That mystery, currently, ranks as one of Australia's best kept secrets. Mocked by some, ignored by others, accepted or dismissed without much thought by most, Christianity here – indeed, throughout the Western world -- is suffering a massive image problem. We in the churches don't always help, when without meaning to we give a false impression of what it's really all about.

This religion of ours seems so ... complicated. So many doctrines. So many traditions. So many rules. So many rituals. So many structures. So many arguments! Well, at one level that's true I guess. After 2000 years on the road, we Christians have accumulated an awful lot of baggage.

But tonight, just for a moment, put that baggage aside. Forget religion's trappings and piety's pretensions. Bracket out the distractions on which our churches delight to waste so much of their energy. Ignore the spiritual pride, the easy judgementalism, which too often masquerade as Christian witness. Push away the complexities, the misrepresentations. And ponder again the central conviction of the Christian faith.

For at its heart this faith is amazingly simple. Breathtakingly profound, to be sure. But amazingly simple.

The Church makes one central claim. Oh it makes plenty of other claims too, some important, some not, but there is one conviction on which everything else stands or falls. And what is that central conviction? Simply this.

That the vast silence which surrounds us, the impenetrable mystery which enfolds us, the ultimate reality which embraces us in life and in death, is ... love! Love so great, so strong, so profound, that we dare to call it ... God.

- Love beyond anything we can grasp or comprehend
- Love that is without limit and without end
- Love that is unconditional – unearned, and unearnable
- Love that always carries within itself the ever-present possibility of forgiveness, of healing, of new beginnings
- Love that is for all, yet leans especially towards the despised, the broken, the forgotten, all whose burdens are unbearably heavy; love that draws those whom it touches to lean that way too
- Love that is especially close to us in the nights of deepest darkness, in the days when the heavens are empty
- Love that breaks its own silence, that utters its own Word, that comes among us full of grace and truth, that descends to the depths of hell, that knows depression and despair, that goes to a cross and beyond, all for the likes of you and me
- Love that enfolds us in life, and enfolds us still in death
- Love that holds each one of us, even when – especially when – we can no longer hold anything.

That conviction is the centre of our faith. This night, above all nights, we wonder at so great a mystery. We celebrate the amazing grace of One who so loved the world that he gave his only son, that we might live.

Be glad, be very glad, that this, the ultimate Christmas gift, is a gift that bears your name. Remember that -- as someone once assured me, in a memorable email one day when I needed cheering up -- “If God had a wallet, your photo would be in it. If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. God sends you sunshine every morning and flowers every day. Face it, my friend: God is just crazy about you!”

There, surely, is something worth getting excited about. As the writer Dorothy Sayers once commented, on this claim that God became incarnate in Christ: “You may call that doctrine revelation or you may call it rubbish, but if you call it dull then words have no meaning”.

“What has come into being in him was life,” says St John’s gospel, “and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it”.

The darkness did not overcome it. And the darkness never will.

Nor will anything else. Ever. Now we know that, come what may, there *is* light in the darkness, there *is* love in the loneliness, there *is* grace in the emptiness, there *is* meaning in the madness.

And there *is* a home, in the heart of God. For you. For me. And for a wandering world whose destiny lies there, waiting, in that stable, in Bethlehem.

So come, let us wonder and rejoice, before love so amazing, so divine. Let us again join our voices with those of the angels, with those of believers through long centuries past, with those of countless brothers and sisters across the world this night.

Let us sing, again, of the wondrous glory of Love’s newborn king.

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