

Sermon: Christmas Day 2007

And is it true? And is it true? says John Betjeman. He says it twice just so you know he's a poet. How I miss the former Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, who could be counted on to pop up every Christmas and Easter to say there were no wise men, no shepherds, no angels, no oxen and asses, no star, no Virgin Birth and no Resurrection. Remember his phrase *conjuring trick with bones*? David Jenkins had a knack of coining the vivid phrase, but the vivid phrase was soon drowned in the swamp of his gabbling loquaciousness: a morbid, even tragic, combination of effects – like a sublime sprinter who was damned forever to have both legs down one knicker.

Actually, Bishop Jenkins was only proclaiming all over the mass media what the theological colleges have been teaching for the last forty years. Having been through that theologically licentious sausage machine, I can tell you the church doesn't need Richard Dawkins to pull it to pieces. It has its own unbelieving theology professors. Their main article of faith is that you can't believe much that's in the Gospel.

In my day the buzzword was *demythologising* and its leading exponent was Professor Rudolf Bultmann of Marburg. His famous phrase was *You can't believe the miracle stories of the New Testament in the age of electric light and the wireless*. And everyone was so captivated by the vivacious novelty of this saying, that no one thought to ask, *Why not?*

Actually G.K Chesterton had already ridiculed this notion before Bultmann came on the scene. Chesterton said, *The idea that a doctrine may be believed in one age but not in another is like saying that a doctrine may be believed on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, but not on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday*. Well, I did write a little satirical musical about demythologising at college and on the last night of term a gang of us got up in the common room and sang demythologised carols:

Hark the herald angels sing; Bultmann is the latest thing.

Now why, if it was not true, did the first disciples of Jesus preach that he was the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary his Mother? Well, the unbelieving professors taught us that the disciples did so in order to stress what an important person Jesus was. Let me examine the logic of this for a minute. Suppose I told you that our Parish Clerk, John Gaze, is very good in the Sanctuary and that he is generous with people in need. This is true. But would I really enhance John's reputation if I were to add, *Oh and by the way, he arrived here fifteen million years ago from the planet Zog on a motorised cucumber...*

What the unbelieving professors were saying is that the disciples didn't believe the Virgin Birth and the other miracle stories. They just made them up. In other words, they were lying. But let's do a bit of literary study for a minute: is the wonderful teaching about love, compassion and sacrifice – the saying above all by Jesus, *I am the Truth* – all the manufacture of a bunch of liars?

Are we really supposed to believe that the disciples endured ridicule, hardship, persecution, torture and death for something they knew all the time was a pack of lies? Can you hear Simon Peter saying to St John, *I know a good way to get us*

crucified mate – let's go round spreading old wives' tales and theological balderdash!

Besides, when it comes to scepticism, there is nothing unique about our modern age of *electric light and the wireless*. Why does the modern age persist in regarding all its forefathers as blithering idiots? The people of New Testament times were just as sceptical as the people of today: the disciples were ridiculed for preaching the Incarnation and the Resurrection. Only a handful of people at first believed the Christian story. Remember the walk to Emmaus all in the April evening when those two disciples were walking along the road with Jesus, not knowing it was he, and they told him that Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified; and they added shamefacedly, *Certain women came saying that they had seen a vision of angels which said that he was alive*. In other words, even some of the first disciples thought the Christian story was old wives' tales.

The unbelieving professors say the gospel stories are legends or romances. On this, C.S. Lewis who was a professor of romance literature commented:

Whatever these men may be as biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgement, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading...If he tells me that something in a gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read....

I know what legends are like. I know that not one of them is like this. This text is reportage – though it may no doubt contain errors – pretty close up to the facts; nearly as close as Boswell. The reader who does not see this has simply not learned to read...

This is good stuff from C.S. Lewis, but we can go further. The earliest tradition of the church says that the story of Jesus' birth is recollections by the Virgin Mary who told them to St Luke, and St Luke wrote them down. After your Christmas dinner, or first thing tomorrow morning, just read the first two chapters of St Luke's Gospel and you will hear the unmistakeable tone of a personal reminiscence. Read the Gospel aloud. We don't do enough reading aloud. The Christmas Story is an eyewitness account. We can believe it because the first eyewitness, Mary herself, knew it was true.

This is marvellous indeed, but it does not end there. The truth is not something that belongs only to the past. The truth lives in the lives of those who believe it. And the bare, bold truth gains shape and substance as it grows in the hearts of those who do believe it. So the truth shines out to us in the icons of Madonna and Child, in the early Italian paintings which give us old midwinter Bethlehem in full colour. As Christ was made flesh in the Incarnation, so the Christmas truth is given flesh and lineaments in the great cathedrals, in the Christmas arias and choruses in *Messiah: Unto us a child is born.... And the glory, the glory of the Lord*. It is bursting with life, light and joy in *The Christmas Oratorio*.

Christian history, civilisation and culture is the incarnation of Christian truth: the Word made flesh, dwelling among us.

The truth of Christmas is a contemporary truth. Not just truth in old Bethlehem, but truth now. And you have to help the truth become realised in your life today. You do this by reading, marking, learning and inwardly digesting it. You must take it into yourself like your Christmas dinner. You must imbibe the truth with your Christmas drinks. Do this, and the truth shall make you free.