

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2008, Liturgical Year "B"

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr.+

"The Truth Behind Christmas"

DO YOU BELIEVE IN MIRACLES?

Merry Christmas! We gather to celebrate the real reason for the season: The coming of the Son of God in the flesh. The birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the One who one day will be crowned King of kings and Lord of lords. It is referred to in theological terms as the Incarnation. It was predicted by the prophets of old, that a virgin would give birth to a son who would grow up to be a man unlike any the world has ever seen; but more than a man, God himself. Does it sound too good to be true? Does it sound too far fetched?

Many think so. Last month I was visiting one of our members who was recovering from hip surgery. The nurse who was overseeing his care stopped in to check up on him and he introduced me to her as his pastor and asked her if she went to church. She replied, "Oh, no, I don't go to church, I believe in God, but I don't go to church. I can't understand much of what they talk about, like being born of a virgin – I don't get that, that doesn't make any sense to me." Now at the time I didn't say anything, but afterwards I thought maybe I should have said to her, "Well, then, I guess you don't believe in miracles?" And maybe she doesn't.

My friends if we are to grow in our understanding of God and life, faith is essential. Faith is accepting things we don't understand, but are still real nonetheless, and I hope we all know that unless we have faith, we cannot please God (**Heb. 11:1-6**). Yes, faith is essential. but that does not mean that what we believe is not literally true.

Even so, many in our world think that the life of faith is believing in stories that have great meaning, give us a special purpose, and inspire noble action, but aren't really true. And I suspect in a gathering this large there are some here that fall into such thinking as well. Even the President of the United States, George Bush, a professed Christian, when he was asked in a recent interview by ABC Nightline News Cynthia McFadden whether or not he believed the Bible was literally true, he said these words,

"You know. Probably not. ... No, I'm not a literalist, but I think you can learn a lot from it, but I do think that the New Testament for example is ... has got ... You know, the important lesson is 'God sent a son,'" Bush said. "It is hard for me to justify or prove the mystery of the Almighty in my life," he said. "All I can just tell you is that I got back into religion and I quit drinking shortly thereafter and I asked for help. ... I was a one-step program guy."

Now I realize the president isn't always a clear communicator, and I would like to give him the benefit of the doubt. But the truth is God did not just send a son, He sent His one and only Son, to die on the cross for our sins to be the savior of the whole world and rule as Lord of heaven and earth. Do we take the Bible as literally true? I would say yes. And unless it tells you that what it is saying is a parable, an illustration or a vision that needs interpretation, you take what it says as true. I mean if God didn't mean what He said, then why didn't He say what He meant?

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But you see what happens is people think they can pick and choose that they want to take from the Bible. They approach it as if it is a buffet. They say, I like this, and I'll take some of that, but I don't like this and I don't want to have anything to do with that. Well, my friends the Bible is not a buffet. It is a full course meal, and everything is on the menu.

And we're going to find that the Word of God is explicitly clear. These are not some made up myths, some fanciful stories, or some inspiring fables. What the Bible consists of is the very truth of God. Now why is this so? Because when you talk about God's Word you are talking about His Truth. The history in the Bible is His Story, specifically, the preparation for Christ's first coming, His actually coming to earth, and the preparation for His Return, His second coming.

JESUS IS THE TRUTH

And when we talk about the truth behind Christmas, we are talking about who Jesus is. What did Jesus say about Himself? Well, I am reminded of what He said before Pontius Pilate when he was brought before the Roman Governor during His trial. Jesus said, in **John 18:36-38**, ***"My Kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." Pilate therefore said to him, So you are a king?" Jesus answered "You say correctly that I am a king. For this reason I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?"***

Ah, how telling. What is truth? Many today still ask that same question. In other words, the governor and those like him think how can we really know what's true? In fact, in poll after poll most American believe that truth is relative. That what is true today may not be true tomorrow, or what might be true for some people might not be true for others. Well, Jesus makes clear there is absolute truth, God's truth is not relative. Do you know why He said to Pilate that He testifies to the truth? Because Jesus is the truth. He embodies the truth. He is ultimate reality. His whole life was a testimony to the truth. In **Jn. 14:6** Jesus said to Thomas and the other disciples when Thomas said we do not know the way, show us the way, Jesus replied, ***"I am the way, the truth, and the life no one comes to the Father except through Me."***

Its' why He said earlier in **Jn. 8:31** ***"If you remain in My word, then you are truly My disciples, and you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." Some of those listening to Jesus answered, "We are Abraham's offspring, and have never yet been enslaved to anyone, how is it that you say, you shall become free? Jesus answered, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed. You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."*** What's the truth? It's Christ Himself. What is truth? We need a Savior and Jesus as Lord of heaven and earth is the Only One who can save us. That's the truth, my friends. So that means everything that Jesus says is true and everything He does is true.

THE EXACT TRUTH

But what about the writings concerning Jesus? Are they true? Can they be trusted? Please turn to page in your pew Bibles to **Luke 1:1-4** This gospel is called Luke's gospel

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because it was written by Luke, the physician, who was a convert and close companion of the Apostle Paul. Luke includes the birth narratives of Jesus in his account. Hence, why we heard from Luke in our Gospel lesson this evening. He is writing to a man named Theophilus. While we don't know much about Theophilus, except that he was probably a man of distinction, maybe even Luke's publisher, we do know that what Luke wrote was so complete that the Church eventually accepted it as Holy Scripture. Luke writes, ***"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word have handed them down to us, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught."***

That's why Luke writes - so that we may know the exact truth concerning the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

NOT OF MAN BUT FROM GOD

Now obviously, it's not just Luke. What about the one who brought Luke to Christ? The Apostle Paul - what did he write concerning the things that were revealed to him by Christ? Please turn now to page in your pew Bibles. ***Galatians 1:11-12: "For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."***

In other words, the message the Paul preached was not made up or man made, but was given to him by Jesus, Himself. Now let's look at what Paul writes in ***2 Tim. 4:3-4: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths."*** Do you know what Paul is saying here? He is saying that the truth of the matter is that anything but the truth of God is actually a myth.

EYEWITNESSES OF HIS POWER AND GLORY

And what about the Apostle Peter? Please turn now to page. ***"For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majesty Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain."*** (2 Peter 1:16-18).

And finally, let's hear from the Apostle John, the writer of our fourth Gospel. Listen now to what John has to say in his first epistle: ***"What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life – and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us – what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you***

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also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ. And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete." (1 Jn. 1:1-4).

So you see, the whole contention of the writers of our New Testament is that what we have is God's truth; not fables, not myths, not made up fantasies, but God's honest truth. And as such, it is to be taken literally.

THE CRITERIA FOR ACCEPTANCE AS HOLY SCRIPTURE

And it is why the Church accepted these writings as inspired by the Holy Spirit. There were five major criteria for how and why certain writings became viewed as from God. First, was it written by someone who personally knew our Lord Jesus Christ or knew someone who knew the Lord face to face? Second, did it speak with authority and consistency? Third, did it correspond to what we already know about God in the Hebrew Scriptures? Fourth, was its focus on the Lord Jesus Christ? And finally, fifth, was it widely used by a variety of Christian groups throughout the known Roman world and over a long period of time?

If the writings met those five criteria then it was considered inspired by the Church. And so the New Testament was established and added to the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, which were already considered Holy Scripture by the Jews and by Jesus since He quoted from them!

So what does it mean for you and me? What we have is reliable. It is filled with the truth about Jesus, the Lord of heaven and earth. It is filled with God's wisdom and it prepares us for eternal life. Jesus testified to the truth, and His Word testifies to Him. And He said that the Father desires that all people worship Him in spirit and in truth (**Jn. 4:24**). As a result, anyone who abides – remains – in Christ's Holy Word is not only His disciple but will be set free from the curse of sin and death. That, my friends, is the truth behind Christmas. It is why we gather tonight. And it's why life is worth living. Let us pray...