

*How do we, in the New Year and beyond... trust the Journey?*

*St Paul's Napier 15 January 2023 Epiphany 2*

The Gospel reading today shows us a pivotal moment in Jewish history. I'm sure it was one of those moments which seemed vaguely important at the time, but on reflection, especially after Jesus' death, took on greater significance.

Some of Jesus' future disciples were following and listening to John's teaching. This was already a departure from orthodoxy, from conventional Jewish practice for them.

I wonder if it was something as simple as John preached in the open area rather than in an enclosed synagogue with its rituals and ceremonies. These men were fishermen, used to being out in all weathers, sun and wind beating on them, the sounds of the countryside and the sea surrounding them. To be in their familiar surroundings breathing fresh air while listening to a dynamic preacher with a charismatic personality would seem like ultimate perfection to them.

But more than that, they had sought John out in particular. Something about his message of newness and a new world order being in the wind appealed. They were looking already, before they knew Jesus himself as a rabbi, for something beyond conventional Jewish faith.

Then this new leader John, whom they were coming to trust, points them on further. His own cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, he labels as the Lamb of God.

As Jews from birth, this would have significance for the men standing by which was far beyond what we might interpret. The phrase Lamb of God for them is a double reference – one reference to the story of Abraham's binding up of Isaac as a sacrificial lamb. The other reference would be to the use of this story of Abraham and Isaac in

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. This term the Lamb of God, therefore evokes for them both a highly significant role for Jesus but also the idea of new beginnings. The Abraham/Isaac incident had been given its own name over the centuries - Akedah. This is what one commentator says about that:

The Akedah, or “binding of Isaac” is the Torah portion that most people relate with Rosh Hashanah. (jewish new year) Though Isaac is the one being bound, the story is referred to as a test of Abraham. Reference to this story appears throughout the Rosh Hashanah liturgy. Even the shofar (ram’s horn) blown on the holiday is said to be a reminder of the Akedah, and how Isaac was spared. Though the story itself is quite troubling, it does contain a message of hope for Rosh Hashanah. In the liturgy we ask God to “remember us for life.” The binding of Isaac concludes with his life being spared, and he too is “remembered for life.” Abraham’s devotion results in hope for life.

So Jesus being called the Lamb of God associates him in the as-yet-unnamed-disciples’ minds, with hope and new beginnings.

We are newly into another year ourselves. We are also in a time in our nation when more people tick ‘no religion’ on the census papers than all the Christians put together. It’s called the ‘Rise of the Nones’. We are living in a time, like the time of Jesus, when his followers are in the minority. So, what hope do we have as faith communities up and down New Zealand?

We can speculate about why these two disciples sought out John and then followed Jesus home. We can also speculate on why the thread of succession broke in our churches. It used to be that children in Sunday school went on to youth group or bible class. They often married someone in the same or a nearby church. Then in time, they brought their own children to Sunday school or its contemporary

equivalent and then their teenagers went to youth group. Then they married often another church-goer and brought their children ... and so the cycle went on. Church growth mainly by reproduction. It worked for centuries, why not in ours?

There are many factors. Not the least is greater mobility in particular movement of children out of their hometown and church to seek further training and employment elsewhere. The connection to church is often lost in that move, with no parent to guide or nag them into a new church community in the new place.

But a greater reason is the change in thinking which occurred in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This church decline has been happening for much longer than the seemingly sudden dip in numbers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now the 21<sup>st</sup>. Even two world wars and the baby boomer population bulge each have had only a temporary effect on increasing church numbers.

Let's situate that period of history when thinking changed so dramatically. Here are the broad periods of history in our western world.

## **Periods of History**

**Prehistoric (to 600 B.C.)**

**Classical Era (600 B.C.-A.D. 476)**

**The Middle Ages (Medieval) (A.D. 476 -A.D. 1450 )**

**Early Modern Era (A.D. 1450-A.D. 1750)**

**Modern Era (A.D. 1750-Present)**

- **Early Modern Era:**
- **Renaissance Humanism** (A.D. 1400 to A.D. 1500 ) - break from medieval scholasticism that incorporated Classical thought into Early Modern ideas
- **Protestant Reformation** (A.D. 1517 to A.D. 1648) - religious movement in which Lutheranism (started by Martin Luther) broke with the Catholic church and redefined Christianity
- **The European Renaissance** (A.D. 1450 to A.D. 1600) - known as a cultural “rebirth” in art, music, literature, society, and philosophy
- **The Enlightenment** (A.D. 1650 to A.D. 1800) - an intellectual movement that is also called the **Age of Reason**; saw the re-examination of politics, economics and science before giving way to Romanticism in the 19th century

**Notice the split between the Early Modern Era and the present Modern Era. That date 1750. That’s the date most frequently used to denote the Enlightenment but it was more of an era in time than a single pivotal year.**

**Within the general location of the early Modern Era there were several important movements which each in their own way changed the world and overlapped with each other. See this chart:**

	1400	1450	1500	1550	1600	1650	1700	1750	1800
Early Modern Era									
Renaissance Humanism									
Protestant Reformation			1517		1648				
European									

Renaissance									
The Enlightenment									

The Age of Reason is another name given to the enlightenment. We associate the metaphor of Light with God and Christ and the Spirit, breaking into a dark world, so the conventional Christian narrative runs.

But the Enlightenment thinkers saw *themselves* as bringing the light of reason into the darkness of superstitious religion.

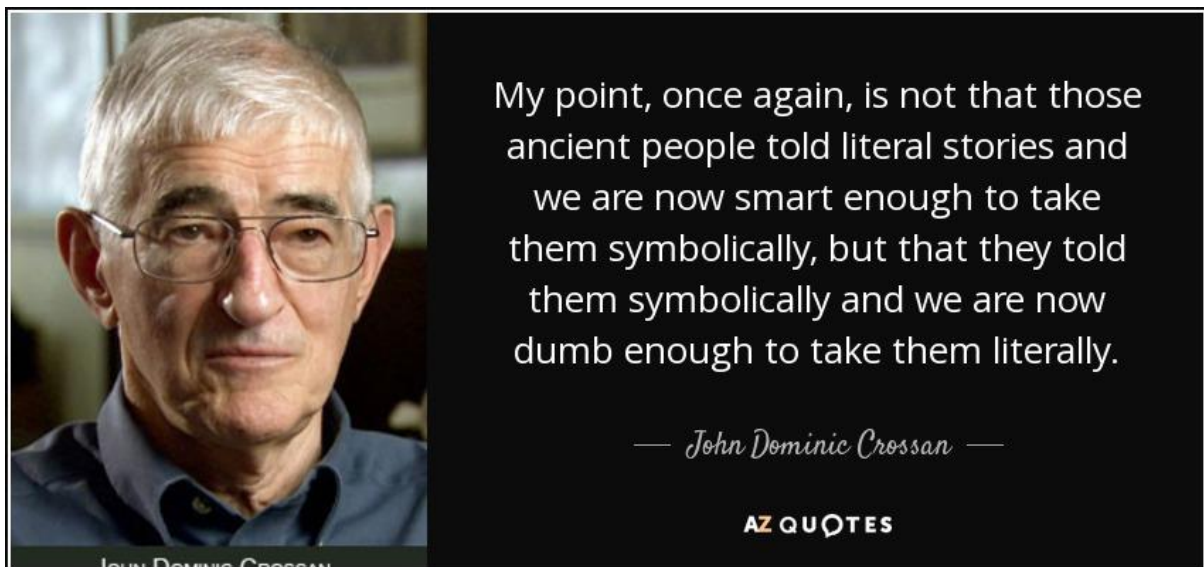
As an example from the world of science, unfortunately perhaps for him, Galileo just immediately preceded this period. His dates are 1564 to 1642. You will know that his scientific observations that the earth moved around the sun conflicted with the theological insistence of the Vatican that the earth was the centre of the universe and everything revolved around it! This is a perfect example of how the basis for making decisions shifted within the enlightenment period from faith or theology to reason and science. By 1750, theological symbolism deciding a scientific theory would seem like nonsense to many people. Now we are a people who can look at the images coming back from the James Webb telescope. We know the earth is not the centre of the universe, not ours nor any of the other universes.

So why am I giving and historical cum science lecture in church? You may be asking!!

Well, we have been born on this side of the enlightenment. So whether or not we have studied much science of work in a scientific occupation we are a people who look at the world very, very differently from Jesus and his disciples, very differently from the Gospel writers and very differently from medieval thinkers and church goers.

We've been raised from birth to look for facts to prove our ideas. We expect an historical account to be accurate to events which actually happened. We 'know' in a scientific manner about the action of earthquakes and weather and volcanic eruptions, tsunamis. We do not interpret such events as divine punishment or reward, or mysterious movements of malign beings.

This means that for centuries, we have unwittingly been reading the Bible in a way that its original writers would never have dreamed of. My all-time favourite quote is from John Dominic Crossan – when he said:



The thought patterns of pre-enlightenment people were symbolic and mythic. The Vatican of pre-enlightenment times, when Galileo lived, did not measure or experiment or test out ideas, they interpreted events theologically. They treated the phenomenon in front of them symbolically.

What has happened though, is that several centuries down the track, many of us are unaware we are post-enlightenment thinkers. For us, all our lives, everyone has thought this way. We are like goldfish in a bowl, who do not know they are swimming in water, since they have always swum in water. They could not imagine anything else just as we cannot imagine people doing anything else but experimenting,

testing, proving and discovering the real truth, the facts, the accurate idea of how things are. We expect history to be factual, we expect measurements to be precise, we expect ideas to be tested. We hire focus groups and employ scientists. During the pandemic, mostly those leading the country followed the science rather than entertaining unsubstantiated ideas. This is pretty much as natural as breathing to us.

But, that is not how the Bible was written, not with that mindset at all. One very clear example is the nativity narratives which we celebrated a few weeks ago. They are very special stories, full of significance and meaning even if they don't offer us accurate history. As a group of stories, they might be better thought of as parables. They certainly are full of valuable signposts telling us about what we might find in the future if we followed this baby boy to adulthood.

That his birth is described as from a virgin, lines Jesus up with emperors and gods of the Greek and Roman pantheon. A virgin birth was a signpost, telling the listeners that this child was going to be very, very special. The involvement of the shepherds as witnesses was something which would never usually happen in that society – they were regarded as smelly and unreliable, yet here they are witnesses to a heavenly announcement, another signpost telling us this child is for Anyman and Anywoman. Then the richest symbolism comes with the magi – maybe three of them, certainly three gifts - again gifts full of symbolism which you will have heard explained over the years you've been in church, gold for a king, frankincense for a priest and myrrh for burial. And the visitors are from the east – indicating this child will be important for more than only the Jewish nation.

The nativity is a wonderful story that tells us so much about Jesus and his significance to the world and to us, through use of symbol and imagery. That imagery would have been easily understood and absorbed by the audience of the Gospels we call Matthew and Luke.

And if the birth is important, there needs to be heavenly confirmation, so a star is needed, a special star which moves as a celestial kind of GPS.

So what have we post-enlightenment thinkers done with the story? Well, argument has raged for centuries over the scientific facts about virgin birth. The star has been interpreted as a planetary conjunction. The historians have tried to find an actual census. The origin of the magi has been speculated upon – that they were Zoroastrian is the latest I've heard.

You see what that discussion is? Our enlightenment minds trying to convince other enlightenment minds of the total accuracy of the story, when we could all relax and take from this wonderful narrative the meaning it presents in symbol and image and metaphor. Jesus is not diminished by this, his significance is in fact enhanced. What was it Crossan said? Those ancient people told those stories symbolically and we are dumb enough to take them literally.

I have a 28-year-old niece who stopped going to church around 16 years of age. She recently started reading the first book of my coffeeshop conversations trilogy and texted me to say how much she was enjoying it. I asked her what were the best bits so far and she replied "I also found the content about pre and post enlightenment thinking and how that relates to reading of the bible very interesting and the relation of Christian biblical stories to other myths and stories (e.g. Harry Potter)." She is an avid Potter fan as are many of her millennial generation. I have no doubt they get the underlying themes of loyalty and love, the battle which is always present in our world between good and evil, the importance of ethical living and the need to trust in your allies and the journey which underlie the Harry Potter series. One major difference for her generation is that J K Rowling does not ask them to believe it is all true and accurate and historically right. They know there is not really a 9 and three quarters



platform at king's cross station, but that doesn't stop them absorbing the compelling truths in the story, through its symbol and imagery.

Unfortunately for many people of her generation and generation X those a little older than her, the bible has become devalued because they have been expected to believe it is a post-enlightenment story. It isn't, so it doesn't fit. Many of the no-religion box tickers in the census need to know that the bible is as rich and as gripping as Harry Potter – and more. They need to know it is true in a pre-enlightenment sense while not being true at all sometimes in a post-enlightenment sense.

Its many years now since I thought the Bible was enlightenment style true. I then went into a period of embarrassment when I didn't know how to defend it to other enlightenment thinkers. Now I can see I don't have to. It is not an enlightenment style book and was never meant to be. It still, however, resonates with our enlightenment viewpoint and offers a dissonant counter to our set scientific formulas.

In today's Gospel, we saw two seekers try first one teacher, then being referred by him to another, greater teacher, whom we know will lead to them going on the greatest journey of anyone's life.

One of the things which attracts them to Jesus is John's linking him through the Lamb of God metaphor with the Jewish new year.

Epiphany means a showing. We say we have an epiphany when suddenly we see sometime new or something familiar in a new light.

Shortly we will sing a hymn about the woman who met Jesus at the well and found the conversation an epiphany which changed her life.

Perhaps in this new year we might have an epiphany. We might find a deeper and richer attraction to the scriptures as we read them in a different way. We are those appointed to bring good news to the

nations and that includes the generations younger than we. We might understand better how to talk about the bible with our children and grandchildren who no longer attend church. We might find our own relationship with Jesus altered as he companions us on the Way. How exciting that would be. So may it be.

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