

The True Meaning of Christmas

Sermon for St Paul's, 30th December 2007

Every Sunday night we had salad. Salad with cold corned beef. Every Sunday night. For fifteen years.

You see, when I was a child, we lived just one suburb away from Grandma Jackson—my mother's mother. And every Sunday evening, after we were done at church and Christian Endeavour, the Jackson clan would trickle into 85 Bennelong Street, Granville. There was our family. My Mum and Dad and three kids. There was Uncle Tom and Aunty Kitty and my older cousin, Narelle. And there was Grandma and Grandad Jackson who had emigrated from northern England after the First World War. And there was Aunty Pat, our maiden aunt, who still lived her parents. Eleven of us in all.

After an hour or two of cricket on the back lawn, and an afternoon tea of shockingly refreshing homemade lemonade and bland griddle cakes, all eleven of us would crowd around the dining room table in this tiny western Sydney home for Sunday evening dinner.

Salad. Salad with cold corned beef.

Every Sunday the same meal.

Every Sunday the same tradition.

Every Sunday until I was 15, because then my family moved to Queensland. In search of some culinary variety no doubt.

So I calculate that, give or take a few Sundays when we were holidaying on the Central Coast with the other grandparents, and the occasional bout of measles, I reckon I had about 700 Sunday evening meals of Cold Corned Beef Salad.

Now you may be guessing that I am telling you this with some resentment. That maybe I am complaining about the unremitting regularity of Grandma Jackson's menu. Not at all.

This was a tradition. A Jackson family tradition. Handed down from the Geordie-speaking northern English working class.

As a young boy growing up in a world in which everything seemed to be changing every week, there was something wonderful and certain and secure and just plain NICE about Grandma Jackson's cold corned beef salads. In a way, it was like McDonald's used to be. Before they introduced the wraps. The burgers weren't great, but you knew what you were getting. And it was OK.

At Grandma Jackson's there was no risk that our world would be disturbed. No risk of danger from those culinary latecomers like pasta, or curry. No risk that she might try a bit of rare warm fillet steak. I presumed that corned beef had come over on the boat with Grandma Jackson herself.

Indeed, the only risk was that my Mum would notice from the other end of the table that I was putting sugar on my lettuce again.

Or that I would forget to laugh when Aunty Pat would burp loudly and then blame the dog. They didn't have a dog.

I loved the certainty and comfort of Grandma Jackson's weekly family gatherings.

But I grew up. The family moved. Times changed. The tradition died.

And I began to wonder what the point of all those cold corned beef salads was.

Why did she do it? Why did we gather together like that? Why did we cram around the table, even on the hottest January evening? Why did Aunty Pat go through the same blame-the-dog routine? What did it all mean?

What was the true meaning of Grandma Jackson's cold corned beef salad?

If the true meaning was about the quality of the meal, then it was all a bit pointless. Really, it was the simplest and plainest meal we had all week, especially after my Mum discovered apricot chicken, not to mention pasta and curry.

Was the true meaning to be found in the backyard cricket game? I doubt it. For a start you couldn't give the ball a decent whack because any lofted drive would sail past the Smith's place and land in the Brown's house. And they did have a dog. So the true meaning wasn't in the backyard cricket.

Was the true meaning to be found in the conversations around the table? I can only recall Aunty Pat's jokes. If we ever discussed anything else, I have no recollection of it. If what we said constituted the true meaning of these events, then that meaning escaped me for all of 15 years.

Well, you probably know as well as I do what the true meaning of Grandma Jackson's cold corned beef salad was. It was about family. About *being* a family. It was about affirming that blood is thicker than water. That families are difficult, sometimes confusing entities, but worth the effort. That parents give life to children and that creates a bond that has value. And that good families do the work necessary to recognise and build that value, because too many families don't do the work. And the value is lost. The bonds of family are broken. And something is wasted.

Grandma Jackson knew this. Now I'm not trying to suggest that Grandma Jackson was some kind of angelic prophetess, like Anna we read about this morning. She could be a feisty, cantankerous old thing. Her temper was not merely short. It was less than short. Her temper was severely vertically challenged.

But she knew something about family. And she knew it was worth doing something to keep the bonds of family alive.

I reckon that was the true meaning of Grandma Jackson's cold corned beef salad.

Which brings me, not very obviously perhaps, but reasonably neatly, to talk about Christmas.

Because, I have been wondering now for the last few weeks, and maybe for most of my almost three score years, whether the world has any idea what the true meaning of Christmas is.

In many respects for them it's just like Grandma Jackson's cold corned beef salad. Same thing every year. Same old, same old. Indeed, one of the Christmas decorations we have from the time we lived in Europe carries the line "Alle Jahre wieder"—every year again.

In German it is not as ironic as it sounds in English—every year again.

Which leads me to wonder whether most of the people in the wider community think the true meaning of Christmas is supposed to be found simply in the ritual of doing the same things over and over.

And perhaps we can understand that because most people find rituals very comforting. Doing the same things, over and over, brings certainty and comfort. God knows the world is a chaotic and unpredictable place. Maybe God wanted us to have a little retreat from the reality of the world. Come on, let's get away from the chaos and do something predictable and safe and comforting.

Buy a tree. Decorate it. Buy some presents. Wrap them up. Give them away. Cook a turkey. Invite the family around. Eat until you drop. Make a joke about the dog to cover any escaping gasses.

I hope you will agree with me that this is undoubtedly NOT the true meaning of Christmas. At least not the way we understand it in the church. Of course, that's not to say it is not worth doing these

rituals. Of course, this is probably a really good thing to do. Escaping into a ritualised tradition is good therapy for coping with a world that seems more and more strange and unpredictable. We can understand why so many people enter into Christmas as a routine. But this is at best a by-product of Christmas. It's not the true meaning of Christmas.

We've heard some sermons in recent weeks that have revealed something of the true meaning of Christmas. When Sue Canov talked about Mary's response to the Angel Gabriel, and when Ken talked about the names of Jesus and about the character of Jesus in his Christmas Day messages, in these messages we were given some insight into the true meaning of Christmas.

But, as for the rest? The rest of the stuff that has somehow attached itself to the Christmas message? Well a lot of nice ritual and tradition. A few nice new songs. And plenty of the same old songs. A nativity scene, that might, or might not look like the actual manger scene.

Cheryl Lawrie, writing last week's Sunday Age says this:

"There's a scene in the film *Love Actually* where Daisy is talking to her mother, Karen, about the upcoming school Christmas festivities. Daisy announces that she's been given the role of Lobster in the Nativity play.

"The lobster?' says Karen (who's played by Emma Thompson), 'the lobster? In the Nativity Play?'

"Yeah, first lobster,' says Daisy.

"To which her mother replies, 'There's more than one lobster present at the birth of Jesus?'

"And Karen's daughter replies, 'Duh'."

Later in the article, Cheryl Lawrie comments "It's good for children to hear the real story of Christmas. Except that, if we are honest, that's not really what they are hearing."

Of course, we should say that the true meaning of Christmas will be found in the Bible. Just read the Bible and you will see what the true meaning of Christmas is.

I wish it were that easy.

The birth stories about Jesus are in Matthew and Luke. Only in Matthew and Luke.

As a result, we have two accounts of the birth of Jesus and they are quite a bit different from each other.

We can contort our brains to try to reconcile the differences, but one has to ask whether this is important.

It seems to me a better question is to ask what the writers are trying to say. What is the meaning they are trying to communicate?

I mean it is so easy to get bogged down in the bits and pieces of the Christmas story. So easy to worry about trees and miss the woods.

Was there really a census? A reference to such a census is not found anywhere else in the archaeological and historical record.

Are the dates right? The Bible says that Jesus was born when Herod was King and Quirinius was governor of Syria. Unfortunately, there are historical records outside of the Bible that show these two were not in power at the same time.

Matthew appears to say that Joseph and Mary live in Bethlehem, while Luke puts them in Nazareth and it is the census, not mentioned by Matthew, that sends them off to Bethlehem. The reason being that they have to go to their ancestral home for enrolment.

So Joseph, descended from David, has to go to Bethlehem. Why he has to take Mary with him is a mystery. One hates to say this in our enlightened and gender-balanced world, but women did not count in those days. And, with respect to a census, would not BE counted.

But, if we take the account literally, there is no doubt that there would be no room in the inn in Bethlehem. You just have to do a calculation to estimate the number of descendants King David would have had by the time Jesus was born. All of them needing to go to Bethlehem to register.

King David had a few hundred wives at least. In Luke's genealogy there are 41 generations between David and Joseph. If David had one wife and only two children and each of the generations only had 2 children, the number of descendants would reach over a million within twenty generations.

Do the maths. Just about everyone in Israel would, after 41 generations, be able to trace a link back to David. And they would all have to go to Bethlehem. No wonder there was no room in the inn!

Now I've just disturbed a lot of you I know. But I want to assure you I am not trying to say that the Bible is unreliable. The Bible is the Word of God. I firmly believe that. But there is a difference between saying the Bible is the Word of God and saying that it is the *words* of God. That is how Muslims think about the Koran. That God wrote every word to be literally believed. That's how Mormons consider their holy writing. And, I recognise it is how some Christians do want to read the Bible.

But the way I approach it, the Bible is the Word of God, and as the Gospel of John reminds, it is the Word of God about the Word of God. It is the story of God's revelation of himself. And the New Testament is the story of God's revelation of himself through the person of Jesus.

And so I approach the stories of the birth of Jesus asking, what is the true meaning that these writers wanted to communicate?

What is the true meaning of Christmas?

You see, something happened to these people who wrote our Bible. Something life-shattering. Something revolutionary. Something deeply, profoundly, shockingly life-altering.

In their personal encounter with Jesus, their lives were turned upside down. Their view of the world was spun out of control. They became firmly convinced that they had encountered the reality of God himself. It changed their lives so completely, so fully, that nothing else was more important to them than this knowledge that they had encountered the spirit of the living God. Nothing, not even life itself, was more important. They were willing to die, rather than deny this experience.

And it was this experience beyond believability that they attempted to communicate in what they wrote. What they wrote, undoubtedly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. God-directed, for sure. When we say the Bible has only one author, we aren't wrong. But, as Ken pointed out in a sermon earlier this year, that one author, used quite a few scribes.

Now the challenge these script writers faced was how to communicate the fact that they had encountered the living God in Jesus when they only had human communication tools to do the job with.

Well, logically, they used the communications methods available to them.

So what we have is less like a historical document and more like a docu-drama. I think if Luke and Matthew were writing today, they would probably produce a TV docu-drama. You know, one of those programs that advertises itself as "based on a real story." And just like the cartoon we showed to the children today, they might put in some extra bits that weren't strictly true in order to improve the communication-ability of the story.

So we have a choice here, I think. Whether to debate the bits and pieces, or whether to look for the main thing that the writers are saying.

And surely the main thing these writers are trying to say is about their experience of Jesus and how it radically reshaped them and their world.

And I think that is the true meaning of the Christmas story. A personal encounter with the living God that changed their lives and that led them into a commitment to follow Jesus into his mission in the world. A saving mission for the individual. And a saving mission for the wider world. Our first reading this morning has Peter telling the crowds how this experience of Jesus changed their lives and led them and how it can change the world.

You know why the cross has two dimensions. A vertical dimension between us and God, and a horizontal one between us and the world.

And this true meaning of the Christmas story is revealed quite clearly, if we can get above the debate about whether Mary was a virgin, or what was the date of the visit of the Magi, or whether Jesus was really born at the place in Bethlehem where the Church of the Nativity now stands.

From the point of view of the early Christians to which Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels, their stories are revolutionary.

The true meaning of Christmas is disturbing. It is not comforting. It is not about gift giving, not about tradition, not about miracles, no matter how worthy these things may be.

There is a meta-story. A bigger meaning. And it is revealed over and over in the stories.

The meaning is revolutionary. A whole political and religious system is bypassed. A new order is announced. The mechanisms and methods of the world are not merely ignored, they are completely disregarded. They are not merely called into question, they are brought under judgement.

Jesus, the King of Kings, is not born noble, but poor. The margins of society are brought to the centre. The political centre is irrelevant.

Jesus says, "Follow me into the margins. I have come to preach Good News to the poor; to heal the broken-hearted and to announce that captives shall be released and the blind shall see, that the downtrodden shall be freed from their oppressors."

The announcement of Jesus birth is given to all the wrong people. There is no birth notice in *The Jerusalem Post*. He is not born as Herod's son. Sure he is David's son, but aren't we all David's descendants? I did that maths.

Jesus' birth is announced to the lowest grade workers—shepherds in the field. These were the people who couldn't get any other job. The *last* people that the Jews would have expected. But the true meaning of Christmas is that the last shall be first.

And the other announcement story is the one about the Magi. We commonly say there are three wise men, but even the Bible doesn't say this. First, it doesn't say how many magi there are, only that they bring three gifts. And second, it doesn't say they are men.

But I am playing the words game again, aren't I? The true meaning here is that these true worshipers are NOT Jews. They are foreigners. The message of Jesus is for the whole world. And that these foreigners who come to see Jesus will do whatever they have to do, to protect the message of Jesus from death in the world.

What risks will we take to protect the message of Jesus from the murderous intentions of the world. We sing the carols, and I hope we do understand the true meaning. But I wonder how many people who watched "Carols by Candlelight" on Channel 9. Because the world is trying to sanitise and make safe the Christmas story.

But the Christmas story is anything but safe. It is a disturbing story.

Even in our 2nd reading today we see that when Luke wants to show the relationship between Jesus and the religious institutions of the time, we turns the expected relationship upside down.

Jesus is not taken to the High Priest, not the Archbishop, not the Pope.

It's just two old people who have little power, and no status within the church. Simeon and Anna.

Again, a revolution.

How disturbing has the world's experience of Christmas been over these past few weeks? Or has it been just safe and comfortable? Have these Christmas celebrations, as fine and worthy and joyous and familiar as they are, have they left anyone just that little bit disturbed?

Have they shaken anyone's sense of reality, by the reality that God came to earth to shake up the whole world?

And I wonder, if we were to take away all the traditions, whether there would be much left for most people.

Without the tree, without the gift giving, without Carols at the Myer Music Bowl, would there be anything left?

Without an understanding of the true, life-changing meaning of Christmas, all the traditions are empty.

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When I turned 15, my family moved to Queensland, and the tradition of Grandma Jackson's cold corned beef salad stopped.

But the true meaning of that ritual did not stop. We still believed in the notion of family.

One of our rituals had been taken away by the reality of distance. But our commitment to family continued. So what happened?

Based on our belief, we invented new ways to express our fundamental belief in the true meaning of Grandma Jackson's cold corned beef salads.

We had holidays together. We wrote letters to one another. Had it been the 21st century we would have agreed that the family that *skypes* together stays together. Because we understood the true meaning of the rituals. A meaning that was bigger than the mere rituals themselves.

You see, the true meaning of Grandma Jackson's cold corned beef salads was more important than the salads.

And we the church need to tell the world that the true meaning of Christmas is more important than the rituals of Christmas.