

Jesus is Real

Luke 2:1–20; Isaiah 9:2–7

When our children were small, and we were living in a country town, my mother was staying with us—the children called her ‘Nonna’—and one of our children was raving on about Superman: how strong he is, ‘more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound’, able to see right through you with his x-ray vision, and so on. And my mother said, ‘The way you’re talking, you’re making it sound like Superman is more important than Jesus!’ And our son replied, ‘Oh no, Nonna, Superman is pretend. Jesus is real!’

Recently we were visiting one family of our grandchildren, and the boys there are heavily into Star Wars, and that day we certainly heard more about Star Wars than we heard about Jesus. I guess the same thing could be said there: Star Wars is made up. Jesus is real.

That’s what Luke was saying in the gospel reading. Christmas is not a made-up story. It is not something that happened ‘A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. . .’ It happened on this earth, at a particular time, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus, when Quirinius was governor of Syria; that’s about 2,018 years ago (that’s where we date our years from—the birth of Jesus) in a place called Bethlehem (see Luke 2:1–4).

You can still go there today. Last year Vivien and I were privileged to travel with a group to Israel and Palestine, and we went to Bethlehem on the West Bank, and into the Church of the Nativity, ‘the oldest site’ in the world of continuous Christian worship, and ‘the oldest [surviving] major church in the Holy Land’,¹ built in the 300s and the 500s over the place where Christians from the earliest times had said

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Nativity#Holy_site_before_Constantine_\(ca._4_BC-327_AD\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Nativity#Holy_site_before_Constantine_(ca._4_BC-327_AD)).

that Jesus was born. In the middle of the church you go down into a kind of cave. A sliver star marks the spot where Mary gave birth to Jesus, and to one side the place of the manger where she wrapped up and laid her baby. When we got home, we were telling our grandchildren about the trip, and showing them pictures, and we described going down into the cave of the nativity, and what we found there. One of our younger grandchildren, whose father is a priest, was sitting on Vivien's knee. 'I hear Dad talking about Jesus,' he said, 'but sometimes I wonder if he is real. But now I hear you saying that you have been to the place where he was born, and seen where he was laid in a manger, now I believe that he is.' I think his parents were quite grateful to us!

'Fake news' is a term used to describe a concocted made-up story that is published as if it is true, and it then goes viral on the internet, and people are taken in by it. Jesus is not fake news. Jesus is real.

Especially when we consider that Jesus is still around. Someone who is dead and gone no doubt has been real in the past, but may not impact us much in the present. But we say: 'Christ has died. Christ is risen.' So Christ is living now. He is a real spiritual presence. The presence of a highly significant person. As the angel said to the shepherds, 'to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord' (Luke 2:11). The one who is now in charge of everything that happens in the world. The one who has the right to command our personal lives.

How do we know that Jesus is real now? How can we be sure of his spiritual presence? Through the Holy Spirit of God who is given to us. We ask God to be filled with God's Holy Spirit, and the Spirit shows us who Jesus is, and what Jesus has done and said, through the Scriptures, and in our lives, and we can talk with the Lord Jesus Christ, and we can receive from him instructions as to what we should be doing now.

Recently Vivien and I were helping out a family in need. Vivien was doing the dishes, and she could see that there were issues, that needed to be addressed, and she was wondering, 'What can I do? Should I say

something?’ And the answer came to her very clearly, ‘Just keep doing the dishes!’ That’s pretty real, isn’t it? I have Vivien’s permission to share that with you. We could give you many instances like that. Often we’ve done what he said, and it’s been good. Sometimes maybe we have not done what he said, and there have been serious consequences.

What kind of person is this Lord Jesus Christ? How does he meet our deepest needs? In the Old Testament reading we heard a prophecy from God written down by the prophet Isaiah just over seven hundred years before Jesus was born—God went to some trouble to prepare the way from a long time beforehand—Isaiah wrote prophetically:

a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders.

This child, this son, who has authority, is given four names, which tell us what he is like. The four names are:

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).

Let’s take each of those four names, and see what they tell us about this person, this Christ, this Messiah. They tell us that this child who has been born, the son given to us, actually fulfils all of our deepest human needs, especially when we find ourselves in needy situations.

‘Wonderful Counsellor’: A counsellor is someone who gives us counsel or advice. Someone who shows us the truth about ourselves and about where we are going in life. We all need that. We haven’t got it in ourselves. How can we know who we are and where we are going if no one ever shows us truthfully? God has been showing us that, from the beginning. That’s when the trouble started—we didn’t want to go along with what God was showing us—that He is God, and that He loves us and has made us, and we are dependent on Him for every breath we take and every move we make, and we can be in close relationship with Him in all we are and all we do, and He has a grand purpose for us, that he is taking us to, with Him—and we said ‘No!

We'll do it, and we'll do it on our own. Who needs Him? We will be God ourselves.' The reading from Isaiah began by talking about 'The people who walked in darkness' (Isaiah 9:2). This is where the darkness set in. We opted for that lie, that falsehood, that thing that can never be true, that we are our own god. That will always let us down. And it needs someone to come into the darkness with us and speak that word of truth from God once more—show us who we really are, and what we're really like, and where we're going. That is what Jesus does. He speaks a word to our hearts that, if we hear it, we know it is true, we know it is the truth from God. And we say 'Yes!' He gives us the grace to do that. He is the 'Wonderful Counsellor'.

And, 'Mighty God': We're not God. We think we are, until something happens to knock us off our perch for a while. We need a power outside ourselves that is strong and reliable and right, when we are weak, and silly, and so often wrong. Not just a power that we can tap into when we need it, while we are still trying to go our own way, but Someone we can personally relate to and rely on, all the time. Someone that we can be a part of, and who can be a part of us, so that we begin to take on those qualities of His moral strength and reliability—always with Him and in Him, and never in and of ourselves—no one less than the Mighty God Himself can constantly supply that need in any human person. And that is the God who comes to us in Jesus—right into the darkness of our confusion and helplessness. He lifts up our burden of sin as if it is His own, and he carries it out to death, and us with it, and finishes it there for us, and raises us up to a life with Him that can never die. Do we ever need the Mighty God that has come to us in Jesus!

'Everlasting Father': 'Father' is a very relational term to use in connection with God. I don't know what kind of relationship you have had with your earthly father or mother. Vivien and I are father and mother to our four children. Our children now have children of their own. We have reason to be very proud of our children, but one thing that touched me most deeply was once when one of our sons and his wife left their children with us to look after, and as they drove off and

waved to them, I saw in my son's face the look of loving delight that he has in his own children. We all need to be in that kind of relationship. But our earthly fathers and mothers can't always give it to us. As parents we can't keep it up. My father and mother have grown old and died—not their fault; that's just the way it is. Even without that, none of us are perfect parents—any more than any of us are perfect children! But to have an 'Everlasting Father'—a relationship like that, that is pure and strong and never-failing, and close always! Jesus comes and takes us and says to his Father God, 'Here am I, and the children whom God has given me' (Hebrews 2:13). And he says, 'I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.' This child from God, here called the 'Everlasting Father' brings God's Fathering of us right home, with a relational security, care and discipline that is eternal and utterly trustworthy. Isn't that what we all want?

'Prince of Peace': Isn't that what we need very deeply? What is it that disturbs our peace? The reading from Isaiah spoke of 'all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood' (Isaiah 9:5). Not the prettiest thing to read for Christmas. But there's still plenty of that going on now, isn't there? Our peace is deeply disturbed, our serenity is shattered, by the darkness of war and global conflict. But at the root of that, it is the inner darkness of the human spirit that will not let us be at peace. That is something that we all carry with us wherever we go, that we cannot get away from. What if there was someone who could command that inner darkness to go away, and it would be gone forever? So we could have true peace, inner peace? We saw that this inner darkness of the human spirit comes first of all from our being out of relationship with God. So this remarkable person first of all would have to be one who makes our peace with God. Who carries away all our offences against God's love. Who breaks through all the barriers we have put up between us and God. Who settles for all time the opposition God must have towards those opposed to Him. Some one who could do that would have to be a mighty conqueror, a

princely ruler who can command and establish peace in the face of all opposition—a Prince of Peace. Like when he commanded the storm: ‘Peace! Be still’—and there was a great calm. God has a very deep peace and fullness and contentment and satisfaction within Himself, and this is the peace that God gets us to participate in with Him—the fulfilled well-being, goodwill and favour, and untroubled harmony, that is the life of God Himself. Once this special person has made our peace with God—the peace of forgiveness, of taking away that inner darkness of sin—and has brought us into this relationship with the Father, then we can live with ourselves—we can be at peace within our own beings. There can be all hell breaking loose around us, and our own peace can still be there. This is the ‘peace that passes understanding’, that we can’t make for ourselves, but which he brings to us as his gift. So then, if we are at peace within ourselves, we don’t have any baggage that we have to offload onto other people—we can be at peace with each other. We have a peace that we can even pass on to others—a fullness, a settledness, a strong love. Someone who could make all that happen would have to be a ‘Prince of Peace’. This one is the child who has been born for us, the son given to us by God, the man who did not hold back from death on the cross, the risen one who lives and reigns for ever.

If you’ve never believed in him, in the Lord Jesus Christ, come and believe in him now, as we confess our sins, as we come to Communion. This is no made-up story—this is real life. Jesus is real. If you know him already, then love him, and continue to live your life for him, and keep on doing what he says. This special day is his day—Christ-mas—why not let the whole year be his, and all the years of our lives, and on after that.