

Sunday 15th August 2021

Fact or fiction? Truth or tradition?

So today's talk is going to be a little different! Perhaps it should come with a warning that the speaker's views are not necessarily those of others, or even correct? In this time of "treading water" I believe it is good for us to share, to learn about each other and maybe even to question. So, I will throw in a bit of history, and little quiz to keep you awake, plus my testimony and hopefully a few other bits to get you thinking.

I hope that at the end of this morning you will be questioning what is Fact or fiction, truth or simply man made tradition.

So, last Sunday Janet read a poem which she claimed had been written many years ago by C S Lewis. Steve Abram asked her to wait whilst he fact checked it- and after a quick Google search said it was actually fake. How did we ever get through life without Google?

Today, more than ever with the internet, we are being subjected to scams and fake news. I quite enjoy checking things out and questioning. But is this fake stuff really so new?

Perhaps our need to have earthly facts and answers may mean we are happy to believe and follow traditions that do not appear in the bible? Can this be harmful, misleading? Sometimes I think it can.

Even as early as first century AD church there were reports and warnings against what we would call false doctrine infiltrating the church, and many of the letters in the New Testament were written to address those errors (*Galatians 1:6–9; Colossians 2:20–23; Titus 1:10–11*). Paul warned Timothy to guard against those who were peddling heresies and confusing the flock: "If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing" (*1 Timothy 6:3–4*).

Quiz time! Only 4 questions!

1. Can anyone name Mary's parents?

(They ever mentioned in the bible? Does it matter? I know as a grandparent I was rushing to visit a new baby as soon it was born - no mention of Grandparents in Bethlehem, just angels, shepherds and wise men donkeys and sheep)

Her parents were called Anne and Joachim. We know this because it is reported in the Infancy Gospel of James, probably written about AD 145, and not by James! it expands backward in time the infancy stories contained in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and presents a narrative concerning the birth and upbringing of Mary.

2. When did Jesus die? - 14 Nisan, 3793 anno mundi—Friday, April 3, AD 33 at about 3 pm I find

that really confusing - in my mind AD - would begin once Jesus had died ! Not so says Google - AD stands for Anno Domini, Latin for "in the year of the Lord", while BC stands for "before Christ".

3. **When was the first recorded baptism of a baby in the bible?** Simply, there isn't one!

4. **What is today?** Assumption.

So clearly there are facts written in the bible, and facts that are not recorded. There are many interpretations of what is written, or not, and there are traditions that have grown up over the years. So how do we know what to believe and what is important?

So it was with the same questioning that I began to check my information for this part of today's talk.

Today, we have just said, is Assumption. Being brought up in England and in an Anglican church; assumption is not something I am familiar with.

In Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic theology, the *notion* or (in the case of Roman Catholicism) *the doctrine* that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was taken (assumed) into heaven, *body and soul*, following the end of her life on Earth.

BUT There is no mention of the Assumption in the New Testament. Does that mean it didn't happen?

Tradition? A feast devoted to Mary seems to have passed from a general celebration in her honour to one celebrated on August 15 (Today!) commemorating her falling asleep. The feast was brought to the West, where the term Assumption replaced the earlier title. This doctrine was then declared dogma for Roman Catholics by Pope Pius XII on November 1, 1950.

Fact: Mary is reported to have died only 11 years after Jesus' death, AD41. I find it odd that as Jesus' mother and an active member of the new church that there is no biblical report her passing.

Fact: The Church of the Sepulcher of Saint Mary, also known as *the Tomb* of the Virgin Mary, is a Christian tomb in the Kidron Valley – at the foot of Mount of Olives, in Jerusalem.

Tradition The church is *believed* by Eastern Christians to be the *burial place of Mary*. A strong *Christian tradition* places her tomb in this dimly-lit church. But read on -

Fact: The large crypt containing the *empty tomb* in the Church of the Assumption is all that remains of an early 5th-century church, making it possibly the oldest near-complete religious building in Jerusalem.

Within the church there is a niche dedicated to the Virgin Mary's parents, and almost opposite is a niche dedicated to Mary's husband, **St Joseph**. Wow when did he become Saint Joseph? This is the man hardly ever mentioned in the bible except for the nativity and then again after losing his son on a long journey.

FACT - Floods in 1972 enabled excavations that concluded that the place where Mary had been buried was clearly located in a cemetery that was used during the first century.

So there we have it! End of part one! Talk of Mary being taken bodily into heaven? But also evidence to support a possible burial site. a crypt and an empty tomb, and A pope over 1900 years later declaring a holiday which we hold today, based on an event that may, or may not, have actually happened?

So Fact? Fiction? Truth or Tradition?

End of part one!

Pert 2

Recently, rightly or wrongly, depending on your views, or your interpretation of the facts or maybe even what you have read on the internet, I have been double vaccinated against Covid 19.

26 years ago I received my double baptism! Was that biblical, necessary, or correct?

Let me give you the background - I was brought up in a family where my mother was a believer and church goer, my father although a believer, but did not attend church due to the fact he saw what he believed to be so much inequality in the world due to religion.

However, I was baptised in our local church, as a baby, and had Godparents. One, my Aunty Ruth, was a practicing Christian and I believe carried out the promises she made that day .

I am also a God parent and these are the promises I too made.

Parents and godparents, the Church receives this child with joy.

Today we are trusting God for her growth in faith.

Will you pray for her,

Draw her by your example into the community of faith

And walk with her in the way of Christ?

In baptism this child begins her journey in faith.

You speak for her today.

Will you care for her,

and help her to take her place

within the life and worship of Christ's Church?

I believe the promises are to help and encourage a closer walk with God. My baptism wasn't about a need to wash away sin as some denominations claim.

Nowadays people seem to be opting for Naming days and there seems to be a belief that Godparents are there to take responsibility of the child should anything happen to the parents. I never believed that was my role. I had my first 2 children baptised as babies, believing I was making a commitment to bring them up to know God.

So as my mother was a Sunday school teacher, I attended regularly (although I did try to skip off as much as I could, having no particular interest and preferring to be out riding my pony!)

At around the age of 12, I attended confirmation classes. This was a series of sessions held weekly by our local vicar which were to prepare us for "Confirmation". I don't really remember much about the content and was more concerned with the white dress that had been bought for the ceremony. I remember it had rows of fabric covered buttons on the cuffs; my mother seemed to be more occupied by inviting friends to the service as it was to be performed by the bishop of Lincoln! So there I was, confirmed. What did it mean to me? At the time only that I could now go to the altar and actually receive the bread and wine and not just a blessing. Oh and a certificate to say I had been confirmed. Was that my golden ticket to heaven? Did I now have confirmation of my Salvation? Perhaps for some that was the case, but for me, well it was just something I was expected to do.

So life went on, adulthood, motherhood and eventually I began attending an evangelical church in our village. I remember my mother saying how irreverent we were as we shared bread and wine that was not administered by a clergy. So where is that in the bible? One evening I was listening to a visiting preacher, Archie Hall, he was a Scot and always preached what I called hell fire, and damnation! That night he spoke about heaven and hell. As I left the building I had to cross a road to go home and I remember to this day thinking, well, if Archie is right, and I get knocked over crossing the road, which way would I be going? Up, or down? If heaven is for eternity then the other option is for no lesser time! So it was time to make a decision.

Malcolm gave his testimony the other week and suggested becoming a Christian was like a trip to another country, either you travel overland and have many checkpoints or you fly and just arrive. This was my border crossing! Having accepted that I had never really made a personal commitment to follow Jesus that night I kneel down and did just that. I can't remember exactly what I prayed, or how I felt, but I knew in my heart I meant it. Some months later on 10th September 1995 (almost 26 years ago) I acknowledge my faith publically by my adult baptism. I do remember being questioned some time before the service by the church elders, and again on the evening, that time I think it was my choice of attire that made one elder question my sincerity? (I was wearing A Bruce Springsteen tee shirt, others chose traditional white gowns or flowing dresses, but I really thought this is about my declaration to follow Jesus and not about fashion)

So before I was lowered under the water I had to answer 3 questions:

Do you believe that Jesus is the son of God?

Do you believe that He died and was raised to life?

Do you accept Him as your Lord and Savior?

So why were these questions so important? The answer is in **Romans 10:9**

"That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

Having answered I do to these I was symbolically buried with Christ in the water, and raised again as a new creation. I remember my mother talking to my mother in law before we went to the service, saying she didn't understand why I was doing this, as I had been christened and confirmed! By the end of the night I think she understood why, and for you today, this is my explanation.

My baptism as a baby wasn't something I had any knowledge of, other than pictures and presents, I wasn't making any decision or commitment for myself. I know my Aunt fulfilled her role and encouraged me in my walk with Christ, but being sprinkled with water didn't make me a Christian. Sadly neither did my confirmation, as I was too young and it really didn't interest me. So this was my public declaration, an outward sign of an inward change. My confession of faith, a witness to others, to commit to living a life where Jesus was at its centre. Here I was - a new creation. Saved! Yipee So I'm sin free and perfect? In God's eyes at that moment perhaps but since? No, not one bit, we all, me included, fall short, daily, but I try, as I promised, to live a life pleasing to God, to ask for forgiveness when I get things wrong and for daily help.

So that's my story of my baptism, but what does the bible say about it?

Is baptism tradition or Truth? What is the history behind it? Why do some churches baptise infants and babies whilst others only adults? Do I need to be baptised more than once? Does salvation depend on it?

The first recorded baptisms in the Bible were the people in Israel going to the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist (**Matthew 3:4-5**). At least, that is the first group. The first person named in the Bible to be water baptized was Jesus of Nazareth (**John 1 V 32** Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.)

Matthew 3:16 As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

So Jesus had the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove, what do we receive?

In **Acts 2:38** Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

So the gift of the spirit is for us also, but don't ignore that first word - Repent -

The bible tells us in **Romans 3:23** for everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.

So why are babies baptised? If you believe that being a Christian requires faith, love and obedience, then baptising a baby makes no sense. So is it because we are all born sinners, no I don't believe that, the idea of "original sin" is not backed up by scripture. We are all capable of sinning yes, but that is something we choose to do. In some religions it is believed that baptism is a way of washing the baby clean of sin, but if this were the case surely this only stands until such time as that person is has the knowledge to make a decision and profession of faith for him or herself.

There is no evidence, mention nor requirement for infant baptism in the bible, although there is evidence to show families were baptised. **Acts 16 v 25 -34**

Some believe baptism, even as an infant is once and for all- The Catholic Church teaches that "baptism is necessary for salvation." (**Catechism of the Catholic Church, ss. 1257**). ... For Catholics, baptism is a unique, unrepeatable act)

The Anglican Church believes, that Baptism was instituted by Jesus Christ for human salvation.

But will baptism alone make you a Christian; will it ensure you a place in heaven?

I believe some form of acknowledgement, decision has to be made, perhaps through confirmation, or a declaration of faith, and acceptance of Jesus as saviour. After all Jesus said in **John 14:6** – "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me."

Peter told us in **Acts 2:38** that repenting and being baptized is for the remission of sins. (They repented and were baptized so that they could be forgiven of their sins.) Jesus tells us in Mark 16:16 that "he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved".

Repentance - turning away from (sin) belief (or faith) - and baptism, it would seem, are all required for salvation.

So, my conclusion: Well, I could continue for weeks searching Google for facts, and my mind would probably be more muddled than it is already! Some may say I did not need to have that second baptism, an adult baptism, but in my heart I knew that was how I wanted to do, to obey Jesus' command and to show my belief and commitment to Christ as my Lord and Saviour.

Jesus was very clear and straightforward to his disciples on what he wanted them to do. In **Matthew 28; V 19- 20** he says "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The disciples saw how Jesus crucified, were still in shock and in denial.

They doubted much and yet obeyed their master.