

Christmas Day John 1:1-14

One of the realities of life in Australia is that we live in a multicultural country, not necessarily in each and every town and place but as we travel around Australia we move alongside many people of many different nationalities, cultures and religions. Over the past 20 or 30 years we've discovered that other cultures have an enormous richness that we didn't necessarily know about or appreciate before. But along with that richness of culture has also come an ambiguity about belief. We've discovered that people of other cultures are often as religious, sometimes even more so, than we are. We've discovered that the religions of other cultures are often as morally rigorous, often as loving and caring, as Christianity.

But the question that faces us as Christians, is what's so different about Christianity? Is ours just one of the world's great religions, or is our claim to uniqueness justified? This is particularly important at Christmas when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the founder of Christianity. Is this just an example of the arrogance of Christians that we insist on celebrating Jesus' birth with a national holiday? In America this is called "the Holiday Season" rather than Christmas, and I'm sure for many it is the holiday or the presents or the food that has become the core of their celebrations in our community.

Well, the answer to the question of the uniqueness of Christianity, lies in where our religion comes from. From the reading from Hebrews we heard: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets." Most religions have come about in one of two ways: either from people observing the world and working out some overriding principles by which they think the universe operates, or as a result of one or more people claiming divine revelation in the form of prophecy of some sort or another. This last way was certainly true of the Jewish religion. God had revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to Moses, Joshua, and to the Judges; and then over the centuries through a long line of prophets. But in a sense that was only second hand. Although the truth of their revelation was borne out by what God did through them, it wasn't really unique. A Muslim, if there'd been one around at the time could have said, "So what, we believe God has revealed himself to us through Mohammed. What's so unique about your religion?"

But the reading continues: "But in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." Here is something different, amazing and unique. Christians claim that God has spoken to through his Son. Not a prophet, his own Son. John describes him as being the eternal Word, the Word that spoke at creation, the Word that was God. This Jesus whose birth we celebrate today is God's own Son. He is God speaking directly to us.

In fact that's exactly what Hebrews says next: "in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds." It's hard to even imagine how a little child, lying in a cow trough, could be the creator of the world. Yet that's what it says. This child, insignificant as he appears, is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.

One of the common features of the religions of the world, is that God is unseen. There are plenty of representations of God. Most religions apart from those that derive from the Judeo-Christian tradition use pictures or carvings to represent God, but it's not that any of them would ever claim that that was what God actually looked like. No-one has ever seen God. Yet one of the things that have occupied the minds of religious people throughout the ages has been the question, "what is God like?" and people have made all sorts of attempts to describe

God, or what it might be like to stand in God's presence. But here we see that Jesus has shown us God's glory, as he dwelt among us.

That is something unique about Christianity and something truly worth celebrating this Christmas morning. A baby was born, he grew and lived among us, he undertook a ministry of preaching and teaching which got him noticed by the authorities both religious and secular and ultimately he died because of it. But – and it's a big but – he rose from the dead and by his resurrection showed himself to be divine, to be God. And here in that stable was where it all began with the birth of a child like no other – the word of God incarnate. That is what we celebrate – that is what makes us Christians.

This opportunity to come to know God, not through prophet or holy person, but directly is still possible today. Through scripture we have the accounts of Jesus' life, his teachings, his actions and his responses to people and circumstances he met on the way. Through prayer we can unburden ourselves of the weight of hurt we carry. As we come alongside one another in worship we can share in the love that we all feel in our relationship with God and with one another. As we come together at Christmas to give thanks for the gift of Jesus let us leave this place with a renewed sense of who we are, Christians, followers of Jesus who have come to understand that Jesus, God's own son, walks with us.

May your Christmas celebrations be joyful, to the glory of God. Amen.

Amen.