

Sermon

Tim Costello [Head of World Vision and brother of the Federal Treasurer] wrote recently “religious faith (is) set to be one of the most influential forces in Australian politics in the next few years.”ⁱ He noted the rise of the Family First Party in Federal Parliament. There was the recent debate about the RU486 drug, and then the controversy about gay unions [marriages] in the ACT.

The Christian faith is also under debate because of the controversy aroused by Dan Brown’s novel “*The Da Vinci Code*”. For three years it has been a best-seller – now over 40 million copies – and we await the release of the film next month.

He’s not alone in this prophecy. Last January Julia Baird in the Sydney Morning Herald wrote about “The high cost of losing our religion”ⁱⁱ [in the 70s, 80s and 90s] and lamented that it was returning in a conservative and fundamentalist manner. She too anticipated a revival in religion.

Add to this the Dean of St Andrew’s Sydney reminding us that Islam views Jesus as a prophet but does not believe he was the Son of God. He went on to argue that because of this the two religions cannot both be right. He said, “Either both are wrong or one is right and the other is wrong. But both of them cannot be right.”

In the *Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown says that the only reason why Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God is because the Church voted for it at the Council of Nicaea in

325 AD when the Emperor Constantine wanted greater power.

Who is [or was] Jesus? What did he do? Was he a prophet or a Saviour? Was he married – did he have sex, did he remain single? Was he simply a man – or is he more than that?

Dan Brown wants us to believe that the church has hidden and distorted the true facts about Jesus? Or worse – that there are things which Bishops and clergy know, but have kept hidden from others – about Jesus marriage to Mary Magdalene!

All the readings today throw us right into the middle of all of this.

We read in Acts “With great power the Apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.” Yes, the hall mark of being an Apostle was to be a witness to the resurrection of Jesus.

Through the resurrection they came to describe Jesus as “Lord”. The word “Lord” as used here is the name given to God in the Old Testament. So to call Jesus “Lord” is a controversial statement. To any Jewish person listening to it 2,000 years ago it would clearly mean – Jesus [who has just been crucified and who his followers now claim to be raised] is God!

John in his first letter describes Jesus as the Son of God the Father – that’s a claim to divinity as well!

And Thomas, seeing Jesus with the marks of the crucifixion still on him, falls at Jesus' feet and exclaims, "My Lord and my God!"

So what is really going on?

Let me suggest that very soon after the resurrection we have the people closest to Jesus calling him "God", "The Lord".

What does it mean for us to say that Jesus is Lord, that he is the Son of God – indeed that he is God? Can't we simply drop the idea and so make peace with the Muslims? Or even make peace with Dan Brown?

Is it really important? Why can't we simply say that we know Jesus, we feel his love, we trust him as our Saviour, we follow him ... and the rest doesn't really matter very much? Just leave it at that!

Before we go any further I want to say emphatically that to know Jesus as our personal friend and Saviour; to know him as our companion on life's journey, to know that he has taken away all our sin and wrongdoing and that through him we are forgiven ... to know that is ever so important. This faith is life-changing. There is no way that I want to take that away, or spoil it.

But the question is "Who is this Jesus in whom we trust?" "Why do we believe that he is God?"

In the *Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown says that to believe Jesus is God is a conspiracy of the Church. Is he right?

Of course the *Da Vinci Code* is a novel. But the trouble is that in the preface to it Dan Brownⁱⁱⁱ makes out that he based everything on facts.

So we read this piece of conversation:

"My dear," Sir Leigh Teabing declared [to Sophie and Langdon], "until that moment in history [the Council of Nicaea in 325AD], Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet ... a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal."

"Not the Son of God?" Sophie replied.

"Right," Teabing said, "Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea."

"Hold on. You're saying Jesus' divinity was the result of a vote?"

"A relatively close one at that," Teabing added.^{iv}

Is he right?

To answer this question let's go back to our Gospel reading.

Our Gospel reading is the original ending of St John's Gospel. [It is very likely that Chapter 21 was added later.] The story about Thomas who first of all doubts and then comes to a deep faith in Jesus is the climax of the whole Gospel.

Thomas is the person who brings together everyone's experience.

In St John's Gospel we have seen how people doubted Jesus. Many left him. People denied Jesus, betrayed Jesus – but some kept on until the end. Thomas is one of them. His doubting gives way to faith – and that's how it should be for everyone – including us. John tells us that this is the reason he's written his Gospel, “so that you may come to believe and so through believing that Jesus is the Son of God you may have life in his name.”

Let's go back to the beginning of John's Gospel. We recall the opening words, “In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word was God.” “No one has ever seen God. The only-begotten Son, who is intimately close to the father – he has brought him to light, and made him known.”^v

Then John takes us on a fantastic journey.

We see Jesus doing great signs: turning water into wine, giving sight to a man born blind, raising Lazarus.

We hear him speaking, “I am the good shepherd.” “I am the resurrection and the life.” “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.” “I will give you living water.” And so on.

Then we see Jesus betrayed, forsaken and crucified.

Now there are rumours of resurrection. Thomas is baffled by everything that has happened. He doesn't want to be disappointed again, so he will not easily believe.

The One he meets is not a ghost, nor is it someone pretending to be Jesus. The One he encounters bears the

marks of the crucifixion – this really is Jesus – there is no mistaking it. This is the body that the grave-clothes could not contain, that the tomb could not hold onto.

Jesus has not simply escaped death, he has gone beyond it. Jesus now comes and goes through this world and a different world as though he belongs to both – just like he comes and goes through shut doors. And yet this is not fiction. Jesus is real.

John is telling us that this is what happens when the only-begotten Son makes the Father, the Creator of the world known. The disciples [like all Jewish people] had been looking for the Messiah [the Christ]. They had not known what to expect. However, the resurrection of Jesus showed them. It showed them that the Messiah is more than the servant of God – he is that; more than the messenger of God – he is that; more than the ideal, obedient, the best person – he is that. But the Messiah is – on top of everything else – God come among us.

John anticipated this at the very beginning of his gospel when he says, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, the glory of God – in the one who is the only-begotten of the father – full of grace and truth.”

And Thomas, who hung on until the end – despite his doubts – saw and believed. Truly the resurrection shows that Jesus is indeed not just a man but God – here among us – full of grace and truth.

So we see that in John's Gospel, written 250 years before the Council of Nicaea, the divinity of Jesus is testified to by

someone who knew Jesus very well. Dan Brown is totally wrong!

When we go through the whole of the New Testament we discover that this is the witness of the writers.

For instance, St Paul says, “The gospel ... is about Jesus Christ our Lord ... he was declared Son of God by a mighty act, in that he rose from the dead.” [Romans 1.2-4]

Remember that the name “Lord” was the name given to God in the Greek Bible that Paul used. It was also the word that the Roman Emperor used when he declared himself to be a god, “Caesar is Lord”.

There is no mistaking it. From the time of the New Testament on Jesus was worshipped and spoken of as God.

The only true God who at the dawn of time created all that is, has now come into his creation as a human being. He has lived, died and now is risen.

And the reason for telling the story of Jesus is not simply out of interest – it is so that we can believe and when we believe then we can have life in all its fullness: now and for eternity.

They did a survey about happiness in England recently. Results showed that three-quarters of the people surveyed who went to church were happy, but only half of those who didn't go to church were happy!

And Sylvia Flaxman – who died on Good Friday – died with hope, confident that she knew where she was going because she trusted in Jesus Christ the Lord.

You know, the Bible tells us that one day Dan Brown will know that he is wrong.

St Paul says that one day every knee will bow before Jesus and every tongue will say “Jesus Christ is Lord”. The question is will we do it when we have to? And then do it grudgingly/

Or will we be like Thomas and say today “My Lord and my God”? Then we can take hold of life and live it to the full.

Let us pray:

Risen Lord, Jesus Christ,
may we have courage to believe in you now
so that in the last day we may be raised with you to
eternal life. Amen.

ⁱ SMH 17 April 2006

ⁱⁱ SMH 19 Jan 2006

ⁱⁱⁱ “All the descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate”

^{iv} Da Vinci Code p233

^v Tom Wright Gospel of John vol 2 page 152