

## Jesus - Man of mystery, history or myth ? Revd Huw Davies 19/5/20

This weekend we have been celebrating the anniversary of WWII victory in Europe. VE Day. 75 years on from 1945.

It has made me think about memories, and how we form our memories. My mother is 92 years old and she remembers well things from 75 years ago when she was 18 years old or 50 years ago I was ten.

Jesus's death and resurrection was in and AD 33.

Marks account, known as The Gospel of Mark, was written down approximately 25 years or so from that time and Luke's account, The Gospel of Luke, perhaps within 5 years later. It was not 75 years on, nor even 50. But nevertheless are their memories accurate? What can be remembered after the event?

Memories are a variable thing.

Insignificant memories are often hard to recall. For example, when did you pass your driving test or last go to the cinema?

But significant memories are much easier to remember. What was the name of your best friend or favourite teacher at school? Have you ever visited another country, which one, did you fly?

Important events that are regularly spoken of are the most memorable of all. What is the number of your house, your telephone number, the birthday of your first child or the anniversary of your wedding, I bet you can remember some of those? They are important and frequently repeated.

Some people would have us believe that you can't trust what's written down in the Gospels. That people's memories are so faulty. Yet for his follower's the events of Jesus' life, his actions, his teaching, his death and his resurrection were not only personally very significant but they were spoken of regularly, perhaps even daily for twenty to thirty years, written down in notes by some people even before being written down in the four books that we call 'The Gospels' - which means 'The Good News'.

Luke finishes his account of the early church, the Book of Acts, with the house arrest of Paul and his awaiting trial under Caesar. He makes no mention of the great persecution under Nero in AD64 and the Great Fire of Rome which Nero blamed on the Christians and Jews. He makes no mention of the death of St Peter in AD65 – Peter the first Bishop of Rome and one of the most important figures in the early church. He makes no mention of the death of St Paul himself in AD67 but finishes with him awaiting trial. Nor does he mention the very important destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem under Titus and Emperor Vespasian, in AD70.

I contend that it is eminently reasonable to conclude that the Book of Acts which was written to give a history of the early years of the church must have been written before these hugely significant events took place, sometime before AD64.

In Acts chapter 24 verse 27 Luke records Paul's trial before Porcius Festus who was Procurator of Judea between AD55 and AD60 – here is a picture of coins of the time referring to his time as Procurator. The book of Acts could obviously not have been written before AD55 if Festus was not Procurator until AD55.



So now we have two dates with a very high degree of probability and rational explanation.

The Book of Acts of the Early Church written by Luke sometime after AD55 but before AD65.

Twenty five to thirty five years after Jesus' crucifixion.

How old were you in 1982? Can you remember who was Prime Minister? Do you remember who invaded which Islands? What was the name of the Battle Cruiser sunk by a British submarine?

All of that was 38 years ago. Your memories may be vague but a friend of mine remembers May 4<sup>th</sup> 1982 very clearly because he was on HMS Sheffield when it was hit by an Exocet missile and can recount the experience in great detail and the subsequent years of hospital visits, surgery and rehabilitation.

I don't doubt that the eyewitnesses of the healing of the lame and the blind, the resurrection of Lazarus, Palm Sunday, the Last Supper, Jesus' crucifixion and the resurrection appearances over a six week period including meals with the risen Jesus would have just as good a memory of the events as my friend Mike has of the Task Force sailing to the Falklands and the momentous day when HMS Sheffield was struck. Do you?

The Book of Acts, written by Luke after AD60 but before AD65 at the latest, is the second of his two volume history of Christianity.

His first volume, The Gospel according to Luke, must therefore have been written sometime before that, reasonable to say perhaps around AD60.

He begins his book with these words: Luke chapter 1

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

He begins his second book with these words: Acts chapter 1

*In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

In the introduction to his Gospel Luke writes that he has carefully consulted many eyewitnesses of the events that happened 25 to 30 years ago. One of his sources is the Gospel of Mark who was the translator and travelling companion of St Peter who wrote down Peter's recollections. Since Mark's gospel was written before Luke's it must have a date around AD55, only 20 - 25 years after the events.

I began this talk by referencing V E Day 75 years ago. Many people can remember that day. My mother who is 92 years old remembers the day that victory in Europe was announced very clearly. She was 18 years old in hospital and could not get out and remembers the nurses coming into the ward to cheer up the patients by parading their beautiful dress before going to the Ball at the Town Hall in Bridgend, Wales.

But the Gospels were not written 75 years after the life of Jesus, nor even 60 or 50 years but perhaps only 20 – 40 years after. If you are in your fifties or sixties or seventies I bet you can remember very clearly some things that happened to you 40 years ago.

Now if they were just memories of fairly trivial and unimportant things and asked as a 'one off' such as who came to your wedding or who did you sit next door to at school? I expect they might be hard to remember on the spur of the moment.

But we must take into account that the disciples had been recounting and rehearsing, telling and retelling their memories of Jesus and the events that they had witnessed, everywhere they went and to everyone that they met. To adults and to children, in homes and in crowds, in lectures and in personal conversations they told and explained what Jesus had done and said, how he lived and died and rose from the dead. Even under arrest and torture they told the same stories consistently and often at the cost of their lives. These are not myths and legends and made up stories they are memories and careful recollections of real events.

These things would not be easily forgotten or misremembered.

If you had sat next to Reginald Dwight for three years at school in 1962 at 15 years old you would remember it. You may well have been telling and re-telling those stories for the last 60 years. Reggie, you used to call him, is now known as Elton John.

Or did you sit next to Vicky Adams at school in 1985? How often over the last 35 years might you have told the story of how she struggled with her acne, her straggly hair and her high pitched voice, and how she snubbed you by not inviting you to her wedding 20 years ago in 1999 years to David Beckham?

If Jesus had healed your brother or yourself, or visited your home for supper in the little village of Emmaus on the day of his resurrection do you think it would be easily forgotten?

**I pray that you will find a new confidence in reading the scriptures as a result of these thoughts and in that be blessed with a fresh sense of Jesus' presence and peace in your home at this time.**

*John ch.20 and John ch.21 and 1John ch.1:1-5. "What we have witnessed with our very own eyes we write to you and testify that these things are true, so that you might trust in Jesus and together make our joy complete."*