

Midnight Communion 2020

Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 24 December 2020

I was reading the other day about the discovery of a monolith in a remote canyon in the Red Rock desert in Utah.

State Biologists from the Utah division of Wildlife Resources were flying over the area to carry out a survey of Bighorn Sheep when they spotted this thing and decided to go and look at it.

No-one knows who put it there, or when or why.

Pretty soon a number of adventurous souls heard about it and from the very limited clues available worked out where it was and went to see this thing for themselves.

Then someone decided to take the thing away and the mystery grows.

But there are a few people who can say they have seen it and that it's true.

The clues leading to the monolith reminded me of Kit Williams book written back in 1979 – *Masquerade*. The book was a story but each picture gave clues to a real treasure he had made and buried. Solve the clues – find the treasure.

Sadly things didn't quite work out as Kit intended...someone cheated and found out the location without solving the clues, although two teachers were the first to correctly decipher the puzzle. (*Physics teachers Mike Barker of William Hulme's Grammar School and John Rousseau of Rossall School.*)

What fascinated me as I re-read about it recently...was that even after the treasure had been found, Masqueraders went on poring over the clues, working out alternative solutions, believing that the

treasure was still out there because the actual solution didn't satisfy what they thought the result should be... so they went on searching.

Does that remind you of anything?

The Jewish people shared a story, a legend, that one day a Messiah would come to set them free. The clues were scattered throughout their history and recorded in their Bible. But like all such riddles, no-one could quite agree on what the Messiah would really be like, and when he would come, and where, and how.

To be honest...this had gone on for hundreds of years so it was more a myth, a legend than anything else.

One specific clue was that before the Messiah came, the prophet Elijah would return (Micah chapter 4) and you can imagine how such a detail would make this all feel like a myth/legend. Elijah lived 860 years before Christ.

Now Zechariah was a good man, a priest, faithful and righteous but there's no suggestion he was an expert in Messianic law. However, a visit from the Angel Gabriel changes Zechariah's life completely. This elderly man and his elderly wife will have a child and their child – to quote the angel Gabriel -

will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Zechariah's lack of faith in the whole project led the Angel Gabriel to shut his mouth for the next 9 months or so...but think of the shock revelations.

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This elderly couple would have a child.

The child would be the Messenger to prepare the way in the spirit of Elijah – so that's what that old clue really meant.

Which meant the Messiah was coming. After hundreds of years...so long it would all seem like a distant fable, it was coming to pass.

It's no wonder that when granted his voice again...Zechariah burst into song...

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;
he came and set his people free.

Just as he promised long ago
through the preaching of his holy prophets:

And you, my child, "Prophet of the Highest,"
will go ahead of the Master to prepare his ways,

And yet, despite John the Baptists extra-ordinary ministry and the thousands who received a baptism of repentance, and despite the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus...there are those still waiting and searching for the Saviour. It's either because he doesn't fit what they expected him to be, or he isn't what they want him to be. And there are many not searching at all who see no reason why these ancient stories have any bearing on their lives today.

Tonight we celebrate the birth of the Saviour, Jesus Christ, the light of the world. It was the night when all of heaven held it's breath to wait and hear the cry of a new-born child. The Salvation story unfolded. God is revealed as faithful to his promise even after hundreds of years, and God is still faithful to his promise to us today.

He came to set us free.

Somehow...Magi from the east had pieced clues together and they came searching and they found their hearts desire...and they worshipped.

Shepherds, minding their own business, were told of the Saviour, and just like the monolith searchers...went off to see if it was true. It was, they found him just as the angel said...and they worshipped.

And tonight...we have come in faith, to offer our worship. This night, heaven comes to us. This night, God's promise is fulfilled. This night, salvation becomes ours in Jesus Christ.

And the best bit about this Christmas gift? It's not what Jesus does, astonishing though salvation and forgiveness are! But who Jesus is. Immanuel – God is with us, his kingdom is here. And that, transforms everything.

See amid the winters snow.
Born for us on earth below
See the tender Lamb appears
Promised from eternal years.

Hail, thou ever-blessed morn
Hail redemptions happy dawn
Sing through all Jerusalem
Christ is born in Bethlehem.