

## **GOOD NEWS TAKES SOME BELIEVING !**

*[Chelmsford: Carols by Candlelight 23 December 2012]*

### **1. JOSEPH STRUGGLED TO BELIEVE**

**“Joseph made plans to break the engagement privately”** (Matt 1.19).

Just think of all the pain and all the heart-ache that underlies that statement.

When Mary told Joseph she was pregnant, Joseph must have felt sick – it was if he had been kicked in the stomach. How could she have betrayed their love like that?

And all this nonsense about an angel appearing to her and saying that she was going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit! It was beyond belief.

*‘How could you, Mary, have done this to me? How could you have gone to bed with another guy? Mary, who was it? For heaven’s sake, Mary, stop pretending with me – who is the father of your child?’*

Joseph must have been beyond himself. He wasn’t just disappointed with her – I guess that he was furious with her. She had ruined his love, his trust, his future, his reputation.

The more you think about it, the more amazing it is that Joseph even contemplated a quiet divorce. He must have been tempted to lash out publicly against this girl who had betrayed him. And yet in the end he stood by her.

It must have been tough for him. The rumours, the innuendoes that were flying around. And what might it all the more difficult was Mary insisting that somehow God had been involved in the process. This was tantamount to blasphemy.

Joseph must have struggled to believe.

And the truth is that the virgin birth – or rather the virgin conception - does take some believing. Every child has to have a father and a mother. That’s life.

And yet, of course, this child was no ordinary child. He was the Saviour of the world. As John Taylor, a former of Bishop of St Albans, once rightly said: *“A Saviour of the world, without a touch of the miraculous at the beginning, the middle, and the end of his life, I would totally perplexing”*. Yet even so, the good news of the birth of a Saviour takes some believing. No wonder Joseph struggled.

### **2. SO TOO DID PAUL AND THOMAS STRUGGLE TO BELIEVE**

If the birth of Jesus takes some believing, so too does the death of a Saviour take some believing. The Apostle Paul, for instance, struggled to believe that God could have anything to do with a cross. For him that was tantamount to blasphemy.

That’s why he persecuted the followers of Jesus so violently.

Listen to the voice he heard on the Damascus Road: **“Saul, Saul! Why are you persecuting me? You are hurting yourself by hitting back, like an ox kicking against its owner’s stick”** (Acts 26.14). We see here that Paul’s mind was in turmoil.

It would appear that Paul had been affected by seeing the way Stephen died – how could he ask God to forgive those who were stoning him to death? Perhaps too he had been almost persuaded by the defence Stephen made before the Jewish Council. And yet for Paul Stephen’s talk of a crucified Saviour was a theological nonsense. It made as much sense as ‘fried ice’.

So Paul struggled to believe.

He struggled to believe that on the Cross Jesus saved us from our sin

It was too amazing to be true.

For Thomas, it wasn’t the cross of Jesus, but the resurrection of Jesus which took some believing.

When his fellow disciples told him they had seen the risen Lord Jesus, Thomas refused to believe. **“Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe”** (John 20.25).

Dead men do not rise from the dead. When you’re dead, you are dead. That is the law of life. All this talk of an empty tomb and of Jesus appearing to his friends, was a nonsense.

Thomas struggled to believe that Jesus had conquered the power of death

### **3. MY FRIEND ALAN STRUGGLED TO BELIEVE**

Yes, Joseph, Paul and Thomas, all struggled to believe in the Saviour.

So too did my friend Alan.

With an Oxford research degree to his name Alan is one of the most intelligent men I know. At the time I first knew him he was the Administrator of the Manchester Business School – having had a successful career with Proctor and Gamble.

He was also a caring father – and that had brought him into contact with me.

For his daughter, Anne, who belonged to our church Girl Guide company, had become a Christian and wanted to be baptized.

Alan was appalled. He regarded her desire to be baptized as a form of teenage rebellion.

But as a caring parent, he knew that he needed to come along to her baptismal service, even although the whole business was a nonsense to him.

But then her brother, Brian, became a Christian – and he too was baptized.

To cap it all, his wife, Irene, who had attended a Methodist church in her youth, came to faith.

And now she was nagging him to become a Christian. Life had suddenly become a nightmare.

At this stage I began to visit him in his home.

I tried to convince him about the truth to be found in Jesus – but Alan was a clever fellow and did his best to tie me up in knots. He could not believe in God – let alone in Jesus.

But then one night Alan had an emotional conversion – he read an account of Mother Teresa and suddenly came to believe in God. But he couldn’t make sense of Jesus.

At one point he wrote me a lengthy paper, 12 sides in length on why he could not believe in the cross. So I preached a sermon on the cross the following week – but he wasn't in church that Sunday!

I argued with him– but my arguments were all in vain.

Finally I took round to him three books about Christian believing and said: 'Alan, read these three books, and then I'll come and talk some more'.

A month later I knocked on the door: I had spent the whole day preparing for the intellectual fray. To my amazement, Alan sat me down in his lounge – and before I could open my mouth said: 'Irene and I want to be baptized'. The struggle to believe was over.

He now knew that Jesus was the Saviour.

### 3. GOOD NEWS TAKES SOME BELIEVING

Yes, for some the good news takes some believing. And not surprisingly so.

It is amazing - mind-boggling indeed - that God should send his Son to be the Saviour of the world. But this is the good news we Christians have to share.

In the words of John's Gospel: **'God loved the world so much that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life'**

Yes, amazing as it may seem, God loved the world – he loved you and me so much – that he sent Jesus that we may have eternal life.

And equally amazing is the fact that all we have to do to receive the gift of eternal life is to believe – to believe that Jesus came into the world for you, died on the cross for you, and rose on the third day for you.

If like Joseph, Paul and Thomas, you struggle to believe, then let me suggest you enroll on our next Alpha course which starts on Monday evening 14 January.

This a ten week course where we look at the basics of the Christian faith.

But, thank God, not everybody struggles:

Mary did not struggle, nor apparently did the shepherds, or the wise men.

Indeed, if the truth be told, when I came to give my life to Jesus, there was no struggle.

I simply knelt down and asked Jesus to come into my life to be my Saviour and my Lord. .

I wonder whether there is somebody here this evening ready to do exactly that.

If so, then in a moment, let me lead you in a short prayer to help you let Jesus come into heart and life.

But whether it be tonight – or at the end of an Alpha course, the important thing is that we believe. For it is only as we entrust our lives to Jesus, that we experience the joy of sins forgiven and the assurance of life beyond the grave.

Yes, let me encourage you to believe – and discover the difference that Jesus the Saviour can make.