

Big idea: The certainty of what we celebrate at Christmas.

FCF: The distraction, devaluing and doubt we often have.

Application: Certainty!

1. Distraction, devaluing, doubt

I was baled up outside Woolies the other day. A person I know was frustrated by the Christmas decorations on people's front lawns. She pointed out that, although not a church attender, she thought people had lost sight of the real reason for Christmas.

We can get **distracted**, can't we?

This is a busy time of the year – there is so much to do. As we gather pace, distraction can settle in, even to the point of mindless automaton, where we just do stuff, say stuff, think stuff that is flowing along with everything that surrounds us.

And all that distraction works like a **deluge** – an overwhelming stream of stuff, of ideas and music and distraction and advertising and planning and requests and expectation. This deluge drowns us in so many ways – drowns our senses, our sensibilities, our ability to discern and stay focused.

As we get distracted and drowned, we can start to **devalue** what we are celebrating. The birth of Jesus can become one of many things that we consider at this time of the year, as well as awards nights, staff dinners, family-time, presents and holidays. Such things, albeit good, start to become equal in value and merit and

effort, so much so that the incarnation of God is set alongside the latest trophy, the menu-plan, and making sure that...

And, at that point, we can even move from distraction and devaluation through to **doubt** – are we really serious about remembering, and celebrating, the incarnation of God, in the belly of a Jewish teenager, born in a stable, and greeted by shepherds and wise men? Is that really relevant at this moment, when family and friends, gifts and goodwill, food and fun, seem so much more appropriate for this moment in time, this modern age?

In the face of our own distraction, devaluing and doubt, we need to return to the certainty of the basics of Christmas – and know their bedrock importance.

PRAY...

2. 'the things having been fulfilled among us' (vs.1)

We live in a country town. Things happen. News is passed on. We hand the events around, as we talk and as we chat. Humans are like that – something takes place, and we share the news, the events.

Sometimes the communication isn't clear. Sometimes it is like an elaborate game of Chinese whispers, where words are mixed with attitudes and perception and assumption. So, for example, a hamstring damaged waterskiing becomes a hamstring snapped stepping in a hole, or a shoulder damaged doing...

Something has taken place – **look at verses 1-2... READ.**

Something has taken place – there are ‘events’ that have taken place. This account starts off by placing itself as concerned about stuff that has taken place in real time and space. Moreover, these are not hidden events – did you see that? These are events that have taken place ‘among us’

Well, in that sense, it doesn’t sound like this is going to be an account that much different to someone’s Facebook timeline, or a series of newspaper articles relaying the social antics of the high and mighty. That is, until we read the full description of these events – they are ‘events that have been **fulfilled** among us’ – did you see that there in verse 1? (REPEAT)

This immediately places these events in a much larger context. These events are not random. These events are not mistakes. These events are no inexplicable, nor are they unconnected. These events are not interesting occurrences that need to be remembered for their novelty value. The meaning is clear – these events that are about to be described are events that have meaning, they are part of a bigger picture, they have purpose and design and intention at their heart.

This is made clear as we dig more deeply into **verse 2... READ.**

These events have happened in such a way among people that they have been seen and experienced – there are ‘eyewitnesses’. Such a fact is important when tracing the facts of fulfilment. There can be examination, and right questioning of these events because people saw them and recorded them.

These events were of such significance that many people thought it wise and profitable and important to 'compile a narrative' about them. This account – as we will soon see – is not unique in one sense – many have undertaken to make sure these 'events' have been preserved.

These events were of such significance that they changed people – these events gave people a new identity: 'servants'. Did you see that there in verse 2?

It is an important description. There is something about these events that changes people, that creates a new way of looking at the world, that gives people a purpose and job and reason for life that they did not have before. There is something about these events that people are drawn to 'serving' it.

These events were of such significance that they were 'handed down'. This is an important, almost technical, description. Whenever it used like this – connected to the words about these events – it is describing a body of knowledge that is carefully preserved and passed on (cf. 1 Cor.11:2, 23; 15:3; Jude 1:3).

Drawing all these threads together, we can say this very clearly: there have been some events, witnessed and open and among people, that are part of a bigger picture, bringing bigger plans to their climax, which have changed people, been preserved and passed down.

This, then, is unlike the gossip about hamstrings and headers and cricket scores that we know in our town. These events are of such

significance that people have been changed and long-held plans have been brought to their fulfilment, all in such a way that life for many has been significantly altered.

What are these events that are being referred to? They are significant, but they are not mentioned anywhere in these opening four verses... Well, this is not the sole book by this author – in fact, this book has a successor, written by the same author (and we will come to that question in a moment).

Listen to how these events are described at the start of that second book... **look at Acts 1:1... READ.**

The book we have open in front of us – written by the same author and received by the same recipient as Acts – is ‘about all that Jesus began to do and teach’ (REPEAT).

Everything we will read is focused on the life and times and words of this man Jesus. They have been observed. They have been preserved. They have been passed down. They change people. They are ‘fulfilment’.

We will touch on those later on, over the next few weeks. But this much is clear: the events described in this book are real in time and space, real in terms of historical verification, real in terms of their impact – and they all refer to Jesus. And they are part of a much bigger picture!

3. 'it seemed good to me' (vs.3)

And, yet, this account before us adds to what has already gone before – **look there in verse 3... READ.**

There is a 'me' and an 'I' here – there is an author. Who is he?

We are never given the author's name – a fairly normal situation with the biographies of Jesus. But, we are given two clues: first, the author is not one of the original eyewitnesses; second, in the companion volume to this account, from Acts 16, the author is part of many scenes – he was a travelling companion of Paul.

That merely narrows it down to nine possible candidates. However, by the end of the second century AD (200 AD), the accepted and universal opinion across the church was that Luke had written this account of Jesus and the church that came from him. In fact, by 160AD, this was accepted. Our earliest known written record of the books of the New Testament – something called the Muratorian Canon (before 200AD) – lists Luke as the author.

What do we know of Luke? Besides what we have just said, his name suggests that he was not a Jew; furthermore, we have three references to Luke in the New Testament. Listen to what they say... **Colossians 4:14... Philemon 3... 2 Timothy 4:10... READ.**

From these, we gain a slightly more rounded view of Luke. He was a physician – a doctor. He was deeply appreciated by Paul, and loved by him. In fact, as 2 Timothy is probably the last book Paul wrote before he died, Luke was his final companion. And, he

was with Paul in Rome when he wrote Philemon, and Paul regarded him as a 'co-worker'.

Luke is an intelligent, capable and close-hand observer of the movement that was the early church. He was a close friend of its earliest and greatest apostle – Paul. He had seen firsthand the amazing impact that the life and claims of Jesus had had on the Roman world. He was probably not a Jew, but his familiarity with the Old Testament is testament to his close knowledge of the plans and workings of God. Luke is our author.

What about Luke's method here?

Look again at verse 3... READ.

Luke's method reflects his nature, his occupation, his relationships. It is meticulous. It is investigative. It is cohesive and all-encompassing. It is comprehensive, from beginning to end. It is ordered and structured. It is purposeful – and we will come to that in a moment. Put simply, this is good history, from a man who was there, whose occupation was investigative!

And there is also a recipient – he is mentioned at the end of verse 3: 'most honourable Theophilus'.

Who is this man?

Theophilus is not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament. In fact, his name – literally, 'God-lover' (the same as

Amadeus Mozart) – has led some to suggest that he is a fictional character, made up to represent any Christian across the ages.

There is one small clue, however, which suggests that Theophilus really did exist. The clue lies in how Luke addresses him: ‘most honourable’ Theophilus. Luke is a careful and meticulous historian who is very precise with his narrative. On three other occasions, he uses the same word translated ‘most honourable’ – in Acts 23:26, 24:3 and 26:25. Each time, the phrase is used to refer to the Roman Governor of Caesarea, Felix, twice and then to his successor, a man called Festus. The way in which it is used, and the precision with which Luke writes, suggests that this term is not used randomly when it is applied to Theophilus. It is a reasonable, although not certain, assumption that Theophilus was a reasonably high-ranking non-Jew in the Roman Empire.

Luke writes to Theophilus – a non-Jewish doctor who is the close companion of the Apostles Paul writes to a high-ranking non-Jewish office-holder in the Roman Empire. Why?

4. ‘so that you might know completely’ (vs.4)

Look at verse 4... READ

Luke has a very clear purpose in his writing. He has compiled his account of the events connected to Jesus because he wants Theophilus to ‘know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed’. This is history with a purpose (as if you could have any other form of history!): to persuade Theophilus of the certainty of the truth that he has been taught about Jesus.

We must understand the situation of Theophilus. He is working in the public service of the greatest empire of the world. He has heard about Jesus – and, I think, he has accepted the truth about him. But, the danger to this man is immense – there is the danger of family exclusion, the danger of social isolation, the danger of loss of employment, the danger of his public reputation being damaged, even (at this stage) the danger of loss of life!

In this sense, Theophilus is a lot like us, or any person who follows Jesus anywhere. In our time and place, we can face the same pressures – perhaps not to the point of death – to hide, or even doubt, what we believe about Jesus. The pressure of our town, where people know us – what we were like, what we are like, how we might stumble, what we might do – can affect us. The pressure of work and employment, where the vision statements and workplace culture can pressure us, or even the expectations of when we do work. The social relationships, even sporting commitments, where certain views are ‘unacceptable’, where certain commitments can be frowned upon. Even the cultural pressures, of our town culture, our national culture, the pressure of social media. All of these can pressure us, cause us to doubt, even move us to devalue, what we know about Jesus, what we say we believe.

Luke wrote this account of the life and times and person of Jesus to persuade Theophilus, to persuade us, that we can know completely, with certainty, that what we have been taught about Jesus is true and right and significant.

Put simply, this is history with a purpose: to assure.

This is history to get the basics right. This is history to get the facts straight. This is history to make sure we know the significance of this man Jesus.

5. Distraction, devaluing, doubt – deconstructed

Such words are important for us to grasp at this time (well, any time, really!!).

Remember how I described our state at this time – the place many of us are... We can be distracted, floating along and not focussed; we can be deluged and drowned by all that is happening at this time of the year, this time of life; we can move to devalue what we say we believe about Jesus, making one amongst a number of commitments and not the defining commitment; and we can move very easily from these to doubt – what if it really isn't true, this stuff about Jesus? What if it isn't really worth the effort or the cost?

Are there any better words to hear than the ones we have just heard?

For the distracted, now is the time to sit down with a biography of Jesus and be reminded of the centrality of Jesus – this is life-changing stuff. Luke wants you to remember how these basic, certain facts will certainly change who you are. Now is the time to take a little moment each day and remember, by reading or listening to God's word, how important these events are.

For the deluged and drowned, now is the time to grab the air that is the certainty of Jesus – to pause, come up from amidst the

detritus of modern-day life, and see again the importance of Jesus. There is nothing so important as 'events' that fulfil, as the man who is God, as the life-changing truth about Jesus. Now is the time not to focus on the urgent or the immediate but the important: Jesus is really who he says he is, and he is certainly worth following.

For those who might be devaluing the truth about Jesus, making it one of a number of other commitments, now is the time to sit and consider the magnitude of what we have just read: no other figure in history has such eyewitnesses, such a big canvas of fulfilment, such an impact that changes people, such a treasure trove of certainty, such an influence across so many people. To limit Jesus to one of a number of commitments is to downplay his significance – and can we do that and still say we follow him?

For those who are doubting the certainty of Jesus, then this account is written for you. It is time to sit down and deal with the investigated, carefully preserved facts, the account of eyewitnesses, and the transformative impact of the events fulfilled. Most significantly, now is the time to sit down and remember the certainty of Jesus, by reading the account of his life that Luke has compiled.

Place: NAC

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Passage: Advent: Christmas basics: Luke 1:1-4