

Sermon Jan 17.21 Epiphany 2 Series Apologetics, part 2:
4 ways the Uniqueness of Christ shines through hazy thinking.
1 Samuel 3:1-20, John 1:43-51

Pray

“Keep everything hazy,” writes senior devil to the junior devil about a newly converted adult Christian.

“Keep everything hazy in his mind, and you will have all eternity wherein to amuse yourself by producing in him the peculiar kind of clarity which Hell affords.” (Screwtape Letters Pg 7)

“Keep everything hazy.” I can hear Screwtape fume on: You wouldn’t want Christians thinking for themselves, debating about things that matter. On the other hand, neither do we want them so dissatisfied with the world, religion or church itself that they actually do something that deepens their faith. We don’t want them curious about the niggling within their soul that yearns for something more than this world can give. We don’t want them ready to respond to a call from God, or worse, being convinced of the uniqueness of Christ, or worse still, committed to the Way.

So goes the argument in CS Lewis’ fictional Screwtape Letters, an all too familiar scenario today of distraction and dissent. It boggles, how some have such a fixed mindset; “don’t confuse me with the facts,” you can hear them say.

How DO we, as Ravi Zacharias says, “make sense in our mind with what we believe in our heart?” Last week we began a Series on Apologetics for the 21st century, that is, giving an answer to those who comment or are critical or ask about our faith. How do we, in the words of the Prayer Book, commend the faith that is within us?

The uniqueness of Christ shines through the haze and make sense to our mind and gives us at least 4 reasons for hope.

I could speak of the uniqueness of Christ in history, in the influence for good in the history of the world, the sheer magnitude of cultural phenomenon of Christian influence of care for body, mind and spirit from health care to education to rights for the most vulnerable and unjustly treated, the economic halo effect of Churches in cities throughout the world. While time doesn’t permit to go into great detail here, you may wish to read Tim Keller’s book Reason for God, or Ravi Zacharias Jesus among other gods. Excellent resources.

Let’s start with what we see, the bible.

Reason for hope #1: The uniqueness of Christ in the bible. Christ is unique for the eye-witness accounts recorded in the printed word, the bible, faithfully handed down to us. The earliest known fragments of original texts of the New Testament that exist date back to between 50 and 70 ad, in other words, stories of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in document form, were circulating around Israel and Mediterranean communities during the

lifetime of witnesses to the events, eye-witnesses who could have disputed those records if they were inaccurate.

There are many other holy books, for example in Islam, the earliest known copies of document describing the life of the founder of Islam, Muhammed, were written more than 300 years after the events they describe. The Topkapi manuscript is an early manuscript of the Quran dated to the early 8th century. This manuscript is kept in the Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul, Turkey (Wikipedia) Eye-witnesses were no long alive to corroborate or dispute the events of Muhammed's revelation. It is amazing the number, historicity and veracity of the bible accounts of Christ's life. In 2017, the Biblical Archaeological Review published an article verifying 53 real people who lived in bible times (BAS online article). We will explore the question, "what about other religions?" in following weeks.

Reason for hope # 1: The uniqueness of Christ in the Bible.

Reason for hope # 2: The uniqueness of Christ in his person. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me." How could a person make such a claim and not be considered either insane, a liar or worse? Jesus said to Pontius Pilate the day of his arrest, "my kingdom is not of this world. You are right in saying I am a king. For this reason I have come into this world...." As he is dying on the cross, he calls out between gasps for breath, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing"? Other great leaders have said great things. What is unique about Jesus Christ is that he embodied the life, the teaching, the miracles, the forgiveness only God could do, in his very person. This reason alone might be enough for someone with an intransigent mindset against Christianity, to reconsider.

Reason for hope #3: The uniqueness of Christ shines in the unique way he calls us. Young Samuel hears a voice calling his name at night and runs confused to the old priest Eli who eventually understands that it is God calling to Samuel. While Samuel's call is dramatic, each interaction Christ has, is unique and respects the individual. Jesus' mother at the wedding feast. A woman at the well. Mary and Martha at the death of Lazarus his friend. Jesus invites Philip to follow then he goes to find Nathaniel, explaining that they had found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and the Prophets and he's from Nazareth, an astounding claim, especially for a guy from Whitby, I mean, Nazareth. We love people from Whitby. So while Jesus calls Philip, it's Philip who calls Nathaniel. Look at Jesus' interaction with Nathaniel. When Nathaniel approaches, Jesus says, Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is nothing false, or as The Message translates it, "there's not a false bone in his body."⁴⁸ "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

Wow, from sarcasm about a town that hadn't produced an NHL prospect let alone a Prime Minister, comes clear word of divine revelation. When the uniqueness of Christ meets the uniqueness of who we are, and how we need his light, our way forward, is made clear. "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to be called children of God" (John 1:12).

Reason for hope # 4: the uniqueness of Christ gives us a glimpse of eternity.

⁵⁰ Jesus said, “You believe^[a] because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” ⁵¹ He then added, “Very truly I tell you,^[b] you^[c] will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’^[d] the Son of Man.” Jesus is referring to Genesis 28:12 when Jacob, one of their patriarchs of centuries past, has a dream, seeing a ladder extending from heaven to earth and there are angels ascending and descending on it.

Why is this important? Jesus is speaking prophetically when he says greater things we will see. The resurrection. The sending of the Spirit, which inaugurates the Church. The encounter of Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch (You can read about in Acts 8). Maybe some of the greater things are actually part of the so-called ordinary parts of the life of a church community, who sets apart Christ as Lord.

As former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams writes in his book *Being a Christian*, “One of the uncomfortable roles we have to play in Church is to be prophets to one another – that is, to remind one another what we are here for...we need to show one another what the integrity of Christian life is about. It is a case of nudging one another from time to time and saying, “what do you see?, ‘what is your vision?’ ‘what are you making yourself accountable to?’ (Such as what our MAP team has been quietly doing since last Spring – you’ll hear more about MAP in the coming weeks) This work might seem more mundane than a miraculous opening of heaven, and yet, as Rowan Williams continues, ‘that we go on gently holding one another accountable before God does not mean nagging or censoriousness. It means something much more like a quiet, persistent re-calling of one another to what is important. Calling us back to our first love, to where it all comes from. When the Church asks important and readily forgotten questions of our society, what are we taking for granted? where is this leading us? we do it for the whole of humanity, which needs that sort of questioning for its health and survival.” As we have seen in recent events, how important this role is in accomplishing God’s work on earth. As US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi said this week, “Words matter. Truth matters. Accountability matters.”

Christ is unique because he is eternal and gives us a glimpse of heaven, even heaven on earth in his body the church who, despite appearances and current pandemic challenges, continues to be Christ’s body, that sees extraordinary light shine.

Thinking things through ourselves, not content to stay in the haze and malaise of the current tide, being able to say I believe because of the uniqueness of Christ, for 4 reasons: in the bible, in his person, in his unique calling for each one to follow, in the glimpse he gives of eternity. I sensed two applications of the uniqueness of Christ:

1. We grow in confidence.
2. We are better equipped to speak up.

Who knows but that our word might tear down a stronghold of ignorance with an intelligent word, pour calm on a troubled soul, and invite others to “come and see” the one who gives

light and love to any, the curious and the critical. In this lockdown life, our mind is free to reflect on why we believe, and reflect on the uniqueness of Christ

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart
Naught be all else to me, save that thou art
Thou my best thought, by day or by night
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light