



Schedule of Services

Services are held every Sunday at 10:30 at Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre

21st January, Rev Geoff Usher: "Martin Luther Reformer"

On the 31st October, 1517 Martin Luther posted his famous 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church t Wittenberg and sent a copy to the Archbishop with a strongly worded letter of protest about the sale of indulgences. This service commemorating Luther's life, will mark the 500th anniversary of the sowing of the seed of the Reformation and the Lutheran Church.

28 January, Colin Whatmough: "Viewing Christianity from a Historical Perspective".

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### **Some of us have traditionalist or even fundamentalist Christian relatives....**



Jan de Beer 1520

Dear Jan,, Your funny story about booking in at the Manger motel made me think of how I was able to value the silly season despite its disgustingly seductive commercialization and its ludicrous theology. I went into Christmas while reading Shelby Spong's book "Born of a Woman". My fundamentalist associates and relations together with most non-religious Aussies treated the Christmas mythology as history. But Jack Spong's book added spice to my "deliteralising" of the myth. I drafted the attached statement which I shared with my progressive religious CPRT friends which was great fun and went on to enjoy the really sacred aspect by cultivating, renewing, and enriching my relationships like the ones we celebrate at Spirit of Life. Regards, Eric.

### **BORN OF A WOMAN – A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus by J. S. Spong, 1992**

#### **PROLOGUE**

John Shelby Spong draws upon the work of a "world best" N.T. scholar, Raymond Brown, Professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary and upon Jane Schaberg, Professor of Religion at the University of Detroit and author of "The Illegitimacy of Jesus". In paying tribute to Jane Schaberg, he writes, "How does a woman, a feminist biblical theologian, listen to the birth traditions as they are written, narrated and interpreted historically

only by men? How can we get behind the patriarchal prejudices and the male biases in order to hear, read and interpret this story more objectively?

### **Chapter I – ESCAPING BIBLICAL LITERALISM**

The first step in understanding the birth of Jesus is to avoid falling into the trap of literalising the Bible stories. They can be intellectually contradictory, and geologically and astrophysically ignorant, and culturally biased; they record unnatural events as naturally occurring and contain reference to apparently approved immoral activities. Originally, they were never intended to be read as literal history.

### **Chapter II – APPROACHING THE STORY THROUGH MIDRASH**

Like all other Scriptural narratives the early birth stories of Jesus which were written between 80 and 90 c.e. are set in the literary genre called Midrash. It was the Jewish writer's way of identifying the personality and behaviour of his (no female authorship) literary portrait and of acknowledging the wondrous achievements of that portrait. He would take a commonly admired hero or incident from the past and associate him or her or it with his literary portrait. In this case, for example, for his literary portrait of Jesus, the writer would take a religious hero like Elijah, and embellish his description of Jesus in a story that would either mirror or surpass in greatness the same courageous or miraculous or famous elements in the Elijah story. He was not writing history!! He was attempting to enunciate the sacred element in the text which would be eternally true of this man whose earthly life demanded such an elaborate explanation. (see p.21)

### **Chapter III - BORN OF A WOMAN – PAUL'S WITNESS**

The first words preserved by the Christian community describing the birth of Jesus were written between 49 & 55 c.e. and were attributed to Paul who wrote twenty years before Mark in Galatians 4:4-5. Paul makes no reference whatever to a supernatural birth. (p. 23-24) The second reference is in Romans 1:34 which claimed he was descended from David, "according to the flesh". Incarnation would have been incomprehensible to Paul. Twenty

years later Mark still contains no reference to the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth. If Paul and Mark were reporting the historical life of Jesus why did they fail to report the most remarkable aspect of it?

### **Chapter IV – FROM THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS TO THE SCANDAL OF THE CRIB**

As still happens to-day, myths grew in ancient communities because of the deep significance of the events being remembered. Attempts to explain the extraordinary life and power of Jesus resulted in the Christmas mythology of the gospel writers beginning with Matthew who wrote about twenty years after Mark. But a myth is not necessarily historical. It is two steps away from the experience of reality. First witnessing or hearing a report about Jesus; then going away and reflecting upon the experience in order to reach an understanding of it; then imagining a story about it. This imagining is done within the culture and at the level of knowledge of the community composing the myth. The culture and knowledge of Jesus' day conceived of absolute power and greatness in regal terms - of kings, of their kingdoms and of their subjects. Hence the formulation of the religious myth of the human styled king God, His kingdom (the three tiered universe), and his subjects with whom he had issue. So the king sent an emissary from his heavenly throne to his kingdom on earth to bring about reconciliation, etc., etc. The divine origin of this emissary was thus determined not by the circumstances of his birth but by the compelling circumstances created by the myth. The rest of the chapter deals with how the author overcomes the counter cultural behaviour of the emissary **who turned out neither to be a Greek mythic hero nor a conquering Jewish messiah, but a scandalously self-sacrificing, self-giving, suffering, powerless human being, a nobody from an unimportant village with questionable paternity.** But he is rescued by mythology and midrash –a child of God, born in Bethlehem and of the house and line of David. "Unfortunately in later history, the tales accounting for the origin of Jesus and the source of his power would be literalised." (p.33)

## **Chapter V – THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BIRTH TRADITION**

The birth stories of Matthew and Luke are similar in many respects but are also widely divergent in many more. This is because the authors have adopted different themes. Consequently neither story can be depended upon to be historic. The genealogies differ; Also events cannot be reconciled e.g Matthew takes Jesus on the flight from King Herod into Egypt, while at the same time Luke takes the child to be circumcised in Bethlehem. The developing birth tradition was also closely linked with a change in the understandings of His exaltation/resurrection. (p.55-56) At first, it was God who exalted/raised Jesus. Initially Jesus was exalted directly into heaven after the crucifixion to the right hand of God (In proclaiming Him God's Son, this for Paul was not a physical return to Earth) . The birth stories now began to develop once Jesus had been declared to be the Son of God. The way was now cleared for Mark to take a step in reverse by making the declaration of Sonship happen at Jesus baptism. The next step backwards in about 70 c.e. was to understand Jesus himself as resurrecting back into human life from the dead. By around 90 c.e. this enabled the divine origin to be associated with conception and birth. The culmination of this regression in the understanding of exaltation/resurrection left the door wide open for the origin of Christianity's heroic figure to be given a virgin birth like Horus born of Isis in 1550 b.c.e, Krishna in 1200 b.c.e., Gautama Buddha in 600 b.c.e, and Attis in 200 b.c.e. This is not to mention the Midrash of Old Testament heroes who also had miraculous births. The birth stories in Matthew and Luke thus say nothing factual about the birth of Jesus. But how much do they say about the stunning power and beauty of his adult life?

## **Chapter VI – MATTHEW'S STORY PART I**

Matthew was not an eye witness. As mentioned in chapter 5, his birth stories are the example of a regressive interpretation of the exaltation of Jesus. "They cannot be read as literary history without turning their truth into nonsense or fantasy." (p.61-62) Firstly, his genealogy has possibly been in part invented to cover up the circulating scandal that Mary's sexual conduct was in question. Does

he insert the names of five women of ill fame into Jesus' list of ancestors to prove that God can even use the sexual improprieties of wayward women to achieve his purposes? Secondly, in order to establish the legal and biological paternity of Jesus as a member of David's chosen line, the annunciation was given in a dream to Joseph and not to Mary as in Luke. The fact that this was attributed to the prophesy of Isaiah chapter 7, that a virgin would conceive a child who shall be called Immanuel, God with us, is completely ridiculous. Isaiah was not talking about the arrival of God to save the world; it was a sign of God's displeasure when Israel's king refused to take Isaiah's advice in fighting the Assyrians.

## **Chapter VII – MATTHEW'S STORY PART II**

John Spong says that the supposition that the story of the wise men bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh was actually orally transmitted to the writer of Matthew is fanciful. Isaiah 60:3-6.(p. 85) From our literally informed point of view, stars that wander through the sky are not admitted by our knowledge of astronomy and astrophysics. Maybe Matthew was fantasizing about Halley's Comet which flew across his sky from the east in around 12 b.c.e. Having read Jack's book I take full responsibility for the following comment: The story read in church at Christmas that a backsliding, paranoid, half Jewish King Herod sought advice from the Hebrew Scriptures concerning the birth of a Messianic pretender to his throne, and entered upon a murderous campaign in a vain attempt to track him down... and for him to do this on the advice of a couple of foreign tourists on camels should have the congregations giggling in their pews and admiring Matthew's sense of humour instead of piously reciting, "This is the word of the Lord". But seriously, The midrash in the statement makes sense to me. Matthew was using a figure of speech. The baby Jesus was more important than Joseph of old who fled to Egypt not to escape a crazy king but to escape the 7 years of famine. The Queen of Sheba brought gold to King Solomon, and He was greater than Solomon. We are left with the single and seemingly undisputable fact that in meeting Matthew's Jesus in His adulthood, Matthew and his first century readers

had had what they sincerely believed was an encounter with God. So His birth to them must have been miraculous. How can we disagree with them???

### **SUMMARY**

How then can we become involved in the celebration of the birth of this good man while retaining our honest search for truth and our intellectual and moral integrity? Can we do so without a reliable understanding of his life history, questioning the validity of his genealogies (which have been tampered with), and disregarding early writers' outmoded attempts to outdo His Jewish forbears, and while denying his supernatural birth, noting that the same angel appeared in two conflicting ways to announce His conception, and while refuting the mythical story that He was the emissary of a king god in a three tiered universe, and while not accepting that He was a divine figure with supernatural powers who had a fictitious resurrection, or that he was a fulfilment of ancient prophesy, or that his birthplace was identified by a wandering star, or that he was welcomed at birth by wise men from the east, or that his birth was heralded by angels to shepherds in the fields, or that He had a Holy Spirit conception to a virgin who gave birth to Him in a cattle shed?

*Eric Stevenson, December, 2017*

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Ginna continues our tradition of frank talk to the polties

(This letter which asks Bill Shorten does he want to be PM, was written last year).

Dear Mr Shorten,
My husband and I are more or less "bleeding heart liberals" of retired age and fed up with Australian politics. It seems like ideology gets in the way of good practical progress in the Turnbull government - and his far right has him by the "short and curlies" as they say. Sometimes we get disillusioned with your party too because it doesn't seem to face the issues that affect ALL Australians. If you want to win the next general election, here are some tips:

1. Get stuck into issues that affect all Australians on a daily basis -

here are three of them: NBN and Medicare and taxes

NBN - the complaints about NBN go across the whole country! It affects everyone. You cannot even find out movie times without NBN. In the areas where it was set up as Julia Gillard wanted it, it works a treat. In areas that followed Turnbull's plan under Abbott it doesn't work. Seriously promise better NBN installation and you'll win votes for sure! I blame Turnbull for the mess - you do the same!

Medicare - the present government say they are supporting Medicare but in reality are chipping away at little things. Our hospitals are falling down around our ears. I'm told by a worker (scientist) at Westmead hospital that they don't even care if the audible fire alarm works because "the building is 40 years old". The cleaners won't clean under desks (in labs) "for health and safety reasons". Waiting lists for "optional surgery" like hip replacements grow. Now my 79 year old husband on a limited pension (he was a senior lecturer at a university) has been told that Medicare now won't pay for the consultation for his macular degeneration injections if it is on the same day as the treatment! People come from the country for this treatment. People who get this treatment are usually old and on limited pensions. But to have consultation and treatment on the same day they now have to shell out \$212 for the consultation and Medicare won't pay a cent. Hasn't the enlightened bean counters in Medicare figured out that letting people go blind costs the government MORE money in increased pensions? So they penalise the least able or least likely to protest - seniors on limited incomes.

Taxes - As unavoidable as death, taxes get up our noses! It seems that those on higher incomes can find all sorts of trusts and house rentals to reduce their income while the good old middle class and working class get the same amount deducted by payroll. It infuriates so many that big companies (Apple, Google, etc) can shelve their money in overseas places and pay minimal tax. And it is

LEGAL. Well, make it illegal! Negative gearing seems designed for anaesthetists and lawyers. Allow it only for the first home investment, half for the second, a quarter for the third and thereafter none. That will release homes for the young to buy houses. It could also bring down rents. Companies can get reduced taxes, but less perks. The same for wealthy earners. Mr Shorten, this kind of reform is ESSENTIAL.

2. National Pride

Mr Shorten, I am sometimes ashamed to be Australian when I see the mess we have made of the boat people situation. Yes the boats stopped but our government has violated human rights in Manus and all the other camps where refugees are locked up with no rights, no future, no hope. IT IS HORRIBLE. Just let the remaining people stay in Australia - at least they can get jobs and become tax payers and save the government the vast amounts of money spent on their incarceration. I'm sure you'll find that the Australian people will open their hearts to these refugees and help them adjust to life here. The boats are stopped now. If any more come with a change of policy just send them back on planes. It may be breaking some international rule we agreed to, but denying human rights does too!

3. Political tit for tat

The recent gay marriage bill has shown the people that our politicians CAN work together. However, it seems like in Canberra one side says yes and the other says no and vice versa. It seems ideological all the time. Make decisions based on practicality for the Australian people (like gay marriage) - that's how you'll win respect and votes.

I hope you will be able to read and consider my words. I know you are a busy man. But if you don't take on board what I have written you won't win the next general election for what I wrote about above affect ALL Australians and ALL Australians are aware of the issues. They cannot be ignored as Mr. Turnbull does.

Good luck

Virginia Hastings

Signing petitions.

This is something we do as individuals, selecting those that we feel most strongly about. Here is a case worthy of anyone's consideration:

ABC News: Cambodian court to make decision on jailed Australian filmmaker James Ricketson next week
By Liam Fox in Phnom Penh

Jailed Australian filmmaker James Ricketson has told Cambodia's highest court the espionage charge laid against him is a perversion of the course of justice.

Key points:

Two lower courts have previously refused bail

Mr Ricketson is charged with espionage for flying a drone over a political rally

If convicted, he could face up to 10 years in prison

The 68-year-old went to the Supreme Court in Phnom Penh on Wednesday (10/1/18) to appeal against the refusal of two lower courts to grant him bail.

Mr Ricketson has been detained since June when he was arrested and charged with espionage after flying a drone over a political rally in Cambodia's capital.

Dressed in prison browns, he addressed the court through an interpreter and said: "This is a breach of Cambodian law and a perversion of the course of justice."

"It is unreasonable to detain a 68-year-old man because he flew a drone without a permit."

Mr Ricketson has been in prison for seven months — one month longer than the maximum limit for pre-trial detention.

He said he had made several written requests to authorities for evidence that shows he is a foreign spy, but there has been no response.

"If the prosecutor has evidence of espionage let them present it in an open court," he said.

"It is my right to conduct a defence but I cannot in the absence of any evidence".

The five-member Supreme Court panel said it would hand down their decision on his appeal next Wednesday.

Outside court, Mr Ricketson refused to allow prison officers to handcuff him as he was led to the court's holding cell.

"See how I'm getting treated? Like a dangerous criminal," he said to reporters watching on.

Mr Ricketson was supported in court by Alexandra Kennett, the partner of his son.

"We're very hopeful that James will receive bail and if he doesn't the court proceedings can be brought to a swift conclusion," she said.

"James remains mentally strong but his physical condition, his health, is deteriorating."

If the Supreme Court rejects Mr Ricketson's appeal for bail he will have to make a fresh application.

If convicted of espionage, he could face up to 10 years in jail.

Mr Ricketson's adopted daughter, Roxanne Holmes, opened an online petition for the release of her father.

She said he is sleeping in a cramped, lice-ridden cell with 27 other prisoners.

"Unless the Australian Government responds quickly, my innocent dad could die in jail. I'm petrified — every day matters now as he gets sicker," she said.

She appealed to the Australian Government to intervene, describing Mr Ricketson as having "the kindest heart". The petition has so far gathered almost 20,000 signatures.

You can sign the petition here:
<https://www.change.org/p/julie-bishop-act-now-to-bringjamesricketsonhome-or-my-innocent-father-will-die-in-jail>

Extra Information in this case:

Cambodia's opposition party has now been disbanded, accused of attempting to overthrow strongman Hun Sen in a purported United States-backed conspiracy. Ricketson is under suspicion because of his relations with the opposition party.

According to Lindsay Murdoch writing in The Sydney Morning Herald:

"Analysts say the supposed conspiracy has provided Hun Sen, one of the world's most notorious autocrats, with an excuse to target his political opponents as he shrugs off any pretence of democracy in the country where Australia has a deal to send refugees from Nauru."

Ricketson says he was in Bangkok to help a group of poor people he has helped before and to make films.

Murdoch says the Turnbull government is providing consular assistance but insists it cannot intervene in any foreign country to attempt to obtain the release of a jailed Australian. Is Julie bishop maintaining a low profile in this case because of the Nauru connection?

Jan Tendys

Did you know most parts of the world are improving (leaving out global warming)? Michael A. Cohen

The fact is, over the past several decades, the planet earth has become an infinitely better place to live. One billion people across the globe have been lifted out of extreme poverty. More kids — particularly young girls — are in school, and literacy rates are near 90 percent. Fewer people die in wars, and far more live in democratic societies. Tens of millions of people who would have died from treatable diseases are today alive. Perhaps most extraordinary of all, since 2000 global life expectancy rates have increased by five full years.

https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2018/01/10/worldwide-health-improves-america-lurches-backward/wCIHzNJrySVaYj8KoQA98L/story.html?s_campaign=bostonglobe:social:googleamp:sharetools

Yes, Global Warming is Scary stuff.

Nobel Prize winning physicist and Energy Secretary under President Obama, Ernest Moniz, says that the technologies we are using currently to mitigate climate change are not enough. (From EPIC podcast, *Off the Charts*)

To keep to the 1.5C target * established in the Paris Accord, or even to stay within the 2C target, we are going to have to not only prevent more CO2 getting into the atmosphere, but actually remove CO2 already in the atmosphere and sequester it underground or use it in other ways.

Here are four projects Moniz says we should be urgently undertaking:

Carbon Sequestration At Massive Scale — "You know, the scale isn't fully appreciated," Moniz said. "If you have 1,000 megawatts of coal plant and you capture 90 percent of the CO2 for 50 years—let's say the life of the plant—and you put that CO2 underground and it forms a reservoir, that reservoir would be equivalent to 2 billion barrels. From one 1,000 MW (plant)! That's the size of a big oil reservoir. So it gives you an idea. Now if you need a thousand of those, this is a big deal, with lots of science problems and lots of policy problems, regulatory problems etc. to manage."

2. Carbon Utilization — "Then there is the science of can we do very large-scale utilization of CO2? I mean with reasonable economics." Excess atmospheric carbon could serve as a raw material for all sorts of products and processes—building materials, cements, chemicals, plastics, grid batteries, media for enhanced oil recovery, solar fuels.

3. Sunlight To Fuels — The Energy Department has managed an innovation hub called the Joint Center for Artificial Photosynthesis in California since 2010. It pursued solar generation of hydrogen until 2015 and is now focused on using sunlight to break CO2 into oxygen and carbon monoxide, which can serve as the basis for liquid fuels. Research is underway at many other institutions as well, but Moniz is calling for much greater in-

vestment, a much bigger push to develop solar fuels. "That's a big Holy Grail," he says.

4. Biological Carbon Management — The Earth already does us the favor of absorbing more than half of the carbon pollution humans emit every year, "sinking" the carbon into soil and ocean. Researchers are tinkering with those processes to develop more efficient sinks, through reforestation or improved grazing practices for example, or through fuels that recycle carbon because they are made from plants or algae instead of petroleum. "Can we manage the terrestrial system to fix a lot more carbon?" Moniz asks. "There's lots and lots to do here. We need to get on with that portfolio. I want to make it clear... we need to do all of them now."

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\* **A note from your editor, Jan Tendys:** Most of the climate scientists I follow on twitter give little hope of us keeping to the 1.5C target. And if we don't do better than we have been doing, we'll sail past the possibility of keeping to 2C. That will mean a HUGE effort on the part of future generations to draw down the excess CO2 from the atmosphere. The most revered scientist in climate change studies, Dr James Hansen, says people are underestimating just how bad 2C will be.

See <https://theconversation.com/a-matter-of-degrees-why-2c-warming-is-officially-unsafe-42308>

Research done by Hansen and others which seemed to show very high sea level rise at 2C was not met favourably at the time of publication. However, recent work by another researcher, Ken Caldeira, seems to show our chances of hitting 2C earlier than thought are high, and that does mean higher sea levels than thought.

[http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=11961433](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11961433)

**Ken Caldeira, says:**

**“Overall, life has been getting better for most people. 2C will be a disaster for some people and some ecosystems, but humanity and nature will persevere. Climate change is not the end of the world, but it is unwise and irreversible, and will cause a lot of needless suffering. “**

Bertrand Russell told us that in the fight against evil, we must not lose what we have of the good. So there is still a time and place to party. This is December at Helen and Colin's. Thanks for having us!.



### **Would you care to join Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship?**

**Membership is open to all adults and includes this newsletter. Full membership \$50 concession \$20 .** Please note that all membership applications are subject to approval at a meeting of the Committee. Ask Rev. Geoff Usher for an application form at the Sunday service.

***If you have a news item or written article you believe would be of interest to the congregation, we invite you to submit it for Esprit.***

It would be helpful if items for publication, including articles and talk topics with themes could reach Esprit editor by the 15th of each month: jantendys@yahoo.com.au or hand to Jan Tendys at the Sunday service.

***Do you have a topic of a spiritual / ethical nature that you would like to share with the congregation?*** As Unitarians, we support an "Open Pulpit" and invite members of the congregation to lead the service if they so wish. *Please see Caz Donnelly at the Sunday service*  
**Fellowship contact 0466 940 461 Website [www.sydneyunitarians.org](http://www.sydneyunitarians.org)**