

# Getting Past the Bones

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 21 May 2023

A Reflection by Rev David Gill

Easter 7 A

Acts 1: 6-14; John 17: 1-11

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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Some years ago I served time with the World Council of Churches, in Geneva. One of my more colourful colleagues was a priest of the Church of England. David Jenkins, a theologian by trade, was destined to become famous. Or, more accurately, infamous.

David's special concern was, how to unpack the truths of the gospel to make them accessible for people today. Anyone who tries that has to expect controversy. In David's case, the controversy was always increased by the way he spoke.

He loved hitting people with provocative one-liners. And he used to play with the English language teasingly, creatively. Not always following the dictionary, but usually stimulating thought and enlightening minds.

If you listened to him with English as your first language, he was fascinating. If English was not your first language, his linguistic acrobatics were often bewildering. And if you were one of the World Council's hard-working interpreters, trying to turn him into French, German or Spanish, he was simply a nightmare.

After Geneva, David returned to England where, in 1984, he became Bishop of Durham – in which capacity he probably ordained Penny Jones. The press soon labelled him “*the unbelieving bishop*”, a verdict that seemed to get divine support when, a few days after his consecration, York Minister was struck by lightning and burst into flames.

As a bishop, David soon crossed swords with Maggie Thatcher – not a difficult thing to do. And he worried many pious Christians – also not a difficult thing to do. Years later, when he visited Sydney, our local inquisition turned out in force to keep tabs on his sermons.

What really landed him in strife was this season of Easter, which this week comes to a close. In a TV interview, he had remarked that the resurrection was “*not just a conjuring trick with bones*”. The tabloids picked this up and, in a masterpiece of misreporting, they ignored the word “not”.

“*Bishop calls Easter a conjuring trick with bones,*” screamed the headlines. And, notwithstanding what he'd really said, David was condemned throughout the land. His notoriety was sealed.

What was he driving at, with that fatal one-liner? “*Not just a conjuring trick with bones*”?

I think he was urging people to push through the story line. It's advice we often need. Because so often our our religious life remains superficial, on the surface of things.

With sometimes fatal consequences in the church. I once almost split a congregation down the middle, when I moved a vase of flowers to what I thought was a better location. I could have denied the Trinity, cancelled Christmas or introduced temple prostitution and probably gotten away with it, but moving the flowers was a step too far. Fortunately, someone with more sense than I sorted that one out.

It can happen so easily. Things that are not vital somehow become that way. Opinions reach boiling point, relationships fray, the church as a community pays a price, and Christian credibility drops yet further.

With results that can last for generations. Presbyterianism in the United States split in 1861, at the time of the US civil war. You know how long it took to heal that division? 122 years - more than a century.

We Christians – Protestants especially - never seem to learn. It is so perilously easy to divide churches. But so damnably difficult to put them back together again.

Back to David Jenkins. What he was trying to do, I think, was lift people's eyes beyond the stories of Easter. Beyond the wrapping paper, to a renewed encounter with the gift those wrappings contain.

Don't worry about who moved the stone – that's not important. Don't fret about where the bones of Jesus may rest today – that's beside the point too. Don't speculate about what a disciple might have caught if he'd pulled out his iPhone for a selfie with the risen Lord.

None of those things is central. They're stories. The way people talked in that story-telling culture to communicate a profound, life-changing mystery.

Which was?

Simply this. In a series of dramatic encounters, they had discovered that what had been most important in the earthly life of Jesus was actually continuing. The divine purpose and power people had glimpsed in him remained with them.

Evil had done its worst, and failed. Death itself had proved powerless. What had mattered most in the strange man of the cross had rolled away the heavy stone of darkness and despair.

That's why Easter became the central festival of our faith. That's why, on Easter, everything else hangs. *If Christ is not risen*, wrote St Paul, *your faith is futile*, it doesn't amount to a hill of beans.

But if Christ is risen, the Bishop of Durham was trying to say. If Easter is not just about what happened to his bones. If what he stood for, lived for, died for has emerged triumphant ... then this is earth-shattering news indeed. With consequences that continue to this day.

In 1980, South Africa's apartheid was firmly entrenched. Nelson Mandela still languished in jail. Desmond Tutu, in an interview, told the BBC that within five or ten years, the so-called "terrorist" would be prime minister of his country.

Aren't you being hopelessly optimistic, the interviewer asked? "*Brother,*" replied Tutu, "*the Christian faith is hopelessly optimistic because it's based on faith in a guy who died on a Friday and everyone said it was utterly and completely hopeless – ignominious defeat. And on Sunday he rose*".

The triumph of the cross is still dynamite to everything in our world, everything in our nation, everything in ourselves that would obstruct or defy the loving purposes of God.

No wonder those early Christians were over the moon.

Last Thursday marked the climax of the Easter season. It was Ascension Day. You know the story. The risen Lord farewelled his friends, was lifted up into a cloud and passed from their sight.

It's the climax of resurrection faith. The Son returns to share in the glory of the Father. The one crowned with thorns takes his place on the throne of heaven. What he was, the self-emptying love he embodied, is stamped with an authority that is universal and eternal.

Sounds a bit bewildering? For us yes, but don't be put off by the picture language. Listen to what that language is saying. What we have here, in picture language, is the church's earliest, most basic credal statement: Jesus Christ is Lord.

That is not an affirmation Christians can ever make easily, or glibly. Nothing about the mysteries of life and death should be said easily or glibly. Beware people who play facile religious word games about God – for that matter, people who play facile anti-religious word games too. The divine mystery deserves better than to be trivialized.

Nor can that affirmation be divorced from the depth of our human predicament. Humanity is in a mess. Bombs are exploding in Kyiv and Khartoum and a dozen other places as well. Relationships are being poisoned by the perverse self-centredness of individuals, races, nations, yes and religious communities too. The darkness, around us and within us, is all too real.

But darkness, we know, is not the end of the story. In the words of the Indian writer and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore: "*Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark*".

So yes we will sing when the dawn is still dark. At times our voices may fade. At times we'll hit some wrong notes. But we will sing. When hearts are breaking and the going is tough, we will sing.

And as we do, we'll keep pondering that conviction. The conviction on which everything else swings. The conviction that has captured the world's wonder through these two millennia:

Jesus Christ, crowned with thorns, is sovereign Lord of all.