

History and Truth: How can you know?

Luke 1:1–4

Merrylands West, am 28 July 2002

Hollywood, as we all know, has been a wonderful source of entertainment for millions of people over the years.

I especially enjoy those movies that are based on true stories. Did anyone see Pearl Harbor? Or U-571? There are several films in the works about Alexander the Great.

Historical films can be tremendously entertaining and emotive – but they're not always all that accurate – not always totally true to what actually happened. So often the Hollywood version isn't all that much like the reality.

But it's not always Hollywood that is to blame. Even Australian film directors have been known to play a little but loose with history.

Did anyone here see the Australian movie "The Dish"? I loved it. It is light-hearted comedy set around the part played in the Apollo 11 moon landing by the giant radio telescope at Parkes.

It's a lovely story – and if you haven't seen it, get it from the video shop and have a look. It's made by the same people behind The Castle and Front Line.

The trouble is, while it's based on a true story, and while it's very entertaining – it's not terribly accurate. Let me explain under the first heading on the outline on the white sheets

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1.) "The Dish" and History

Lest you think I have totally lost it this time (and our regulars will know that I have an interest in things astronomical), let me say that there is a point to this little illustration...

The movie "The Dish" is about that most extraordinary event, the landing of the first men on the moon. The movie is concerned, in particular, about how the first TV from the moon was received – and it hinges on all sorts of events that were happening at Parkes.

There were technical problems – the movie tells us – that nearly meant no-one saw Neil Armstrong step onto the moon at all – because, as it says in the movie, no-one else was able to receive the TV signal.

But, after the movie came out in mid 2000, some people started saying. “Hey – that’s not true. In fact, Parkes didn’t get the first TV signal at all. In reality, the NASA tracking station down at Honeysuckle Creek near Canberra did – and it was the picture from Honeysuckle that was seen by millions around the world.”

Now, whether you care who had the first TV from the moon or not doesn’t matter. Follow this next bit, and you’ll see how it fits in to what we’re thinking about this morning.

How can we find out if the movie “The Dish” is giving us an accurate account of what happened in July 1969?

Well, here in church, there are two groups here this morning –

The first group is those of us who were around in the days of Apollo and who remember it (whether we cared about it or not isn’t relevant).

And the second group is those of us who weren’t old enough – or weren’t even born.

Let me ask you – if you are a member of that second group – and in particular if you are one of those who weren’t even born in 1969 – because the Apollo 11 moon landing happened before you were born – does the fact that you weren’t around to see it mean that it is any less an event in history?

Just because you weren’t there, does that mean that the account of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin setting foot on the moon is just a fairy story?

Of course not. It happened whether or not we were here.

But if you weren’t even born in 1969 – or if, like me and the rest of us, you were around, but weren’t actually involved personally in the Apollo Program, how would you discover what really happened?

Well you could do what I did during the week – and leaf through newspapers from July 1969 to read what was being reported at the time.

I found one clipping – from the Sydney Morning Herald the day after the moon landing – which specifically mentions the roles of Parkes and Honeysuckle. (**show OHP.**)

It talks about how it was a “great day for Parkes” – and quotes the Director of Parkes, John Bolton. The article says that Parkes gave the clearest TV from the moon – but they didn’t get the signal at all until six minutes into the moon walk. So, that throws some doubt on the version of events that the movie gives. At Parkes, they missed the first step.

As well as looking through newspapers, you could access television footage... of the first moon walk – and footage of the Parkes Radio Telescope and its Director talking about the part they were playing in the mission.

So, you can go back to those source documents. And doing that is invaluable.

But we’re not restricted to those documents. Why? Because the landing on the moon happened in recent history. It was only 33 years ago.

Now, 33 years might seem long time to you, but there are many people who worked on the Apollo missions in one way or another who you could go and talk to – to ask them what it was like – to ask them for their personal recollections – and to ask what actually happened – not just with who had the first TV from the moon, but all sorts of things about that amazing moment in human history.

As some of you know, the week before last, we went down to Canberra (the family thought they were going on a holiday!), and it was my privilege to spend some time talking with a man who was intimately involved in the Apollo missions. You see, at the time, he was Deputy Director of the tracking station at Honeysuckle Creek, just outside Canberra.

When Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon, he was at the Operations console and was able to announce to Houston that they were receiving TV – and it was their pictures of Neil Armstrong stepping onto the moon that were beamed around the world. They came from Honeysuckle, not from Parkes.

This former Deputy Director of the tracking station has memories, as well as documents and recordings to back up his memories. And, of course, there are others who worked with him. It was only 33 years ago. Those men have memories that I don't have – because I wasn't there.

But just because I wasn't there myself, it doesn't mean I can't know what actually happened.

- Now – what on earth does this have to do with why we are here this morning – or is all this nothing more than an elaborate excuse to invite you over next door to show you my holiday photos after morning tea?

Well, this touches on how we can know anything about events in the past – not just something as recent as 33 years ago.

The landing on the moon was amazing – but there is another amazing of event of even greater significance.

I'm talking about the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. This is an event that the Bible claims is of the greatest importance for every man, woman and child.

And more than that, the Bible claims that each and every one of us needs to personally make up our mind about Jesus – and it calls on us to put our trust in him. It is because of this event that we have met together this morning.

“But”, you might say, “Jesus lived so long ago. How can we reliably know anything about him?”

Remember Apollo XI? If you don't, then you are relying on the testimony of others.

In the case of the question of TV from the moon, you could go down to Canberra and talk to some of the guys who actually received the signals.

But when we want to learn about Jesus, we cannot go and talk to the eyewitnesses. We could have – if we'd been around at the right time – but not now.

However, there is something we can do. We can read the research of others who – like us

– weren't there, but who wanted to know the truth.

• In the Bible, there are four “Gospels” – or biographies that tell the life of Jesus. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Of those, Matthew and John were written by people who were actually there – and Mark was written by someone who was very close to Peter – who was there.

Luke's Gospel, on the other hand, was written by someone who wasn't there. Luke was a medical doctor – but he was also something of an historian. And the books he wrote – the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts – were written by him at about the same distance in time from the death and resurrection of Jesus as we are today from the events of Apollo XI – that is, about 30 years.

Unlike most of the other writers of the New Testament, Luke wasn't a Jew – he was a Gentile, a non-Jew – who was born and who grew up probably in northern Greece. But he had heard the message about Jesus and had become convinced of it.

He wrote his two-volume work, in the first instance, for someone who seems to have been an important Roman official – and if you care to glance at the front of the yellow sheets, you'll see that passage we heard earlier is printed there. He tells us how he went about his work of compiling this biography of Jesus.

- 1 **“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,**
- 2 **just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.**
- 3 **Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,**
- 4 **so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”**

He's saying that there's been a lot of interest in Jesus by many people. Others have written down what happened too – including the writers of the other Gospels. But Luke wants to be sure of the facts for himself. He sifts the evidence.

We know that he spends time with those who were actually there – eyewitnesses. He hears about Jesus – about their recollections of what he said and did – and he hears how they became convinced that he is indeed God’s Son. He does basic historical research.

And then he writes down the facts he has uncovered.

- Just because something happened outside our own personal experience doesn’t mean we can’t know the truth of the matter – whether it be the Apollo Program or the life of Jesus.

And you, too, can know the truth about Jesus. Don’t take my word for it – read this carefully written and researched account by Luke – Luke’s Gospel.

Normally it’s printed as part of the Bible – but you are very welcome to take a copy of Luke by itself to read at home. You don’t have to be in the dark about Jesus. Check the facts yourself – you be glad you did.

2.) The story so far

As a non-Jew, Luke will also need to do some other homework. You see, the history of Israel is a history of how God has acted – in history.

It stretches back to around 2,000BC when God called Abraham to trust him. It includes the 400 years in which Abraham’s descendants lived in Egypt – much of that time in slavery.

It includes the Lord’s rescue of his people from Egypt in the Exodus – his promises to be their God – and his gift to them of the Promised Land.

It includes the promises given to the greatest king of Israel, David, that a greater King would arise after him – a king who would reign on David’s throne forever.

And all this time, the expectation that God would send his Chosen One, the Messiah, was growing.

So – there was a background to the coming of Jesus. And that background included the events in the world all around.

We're going to look at some of those – at least in thumbnail form – over the next few weeks.

When Jesus came, many were convinced that he was the fulfilment of God's promises made over many centuries – that he was (and is) the Son of God – who came to save people.

3.) You can know the truth

So often, I have heard it said, "Well, we can't really know anything about Jesus from this distance in history. We can't even be sure he existed!"

That common idea is misplaced.

Over the next few weeks on Sunday mornings, we'll see that we do indeed know a great deal about the world of Jesus. We'll learn something about the places he travelled to – the culture he moved in – the people he encountered – and others who shaped the world in which he lived.

We're not doing this for the sake of uncovering some neat – but useless – facts, but rather to help us to understand the Gospel accounts better – and to give some background that most of us probably won't have.

We won't only be looking at the Gospel of Luke – where we began this morning, but we will be coming back to it time and again because Luke is such a careful historian.

- In both Luke and Acts, he mentions times and places and – most importantly – people. Often those things are quite incidental to the story he is telling – but they enable us to check up on Luke from independent records of the time.

You see – if Luke is found to be reliable and accurate in the incidental and relatively unimportant things, then we can have much greater confidence in all that he writes about.

Over the years, various people set out to disprove the Bible records about Jesus. Historians, lawyers, academics. One journalist felt that the Gospels needed to be exposed as a sham – and he planned to write a book to that effect. His name was Frank Morison. But, the more he checked the facts, the more – to his surprise – the Gospels stood up to scrutiny.

In the end, he came to the inescapable conclusion that they are accurate – that Jesus really is God’s Son come to save us from eternal death. So Frank Morison write a book that has become famous – “Who Moved the Stone?”. He subtitled it, “The book that refused to be written”, because he didn’t end up writing the book he’d set out to write. He began as a great sceptic – but when he opened his mind to the evidence, he became convinced it is true.

So, over the next few weeks, we’ll look at people like Pontius Pilate, King Herod, John the Baptist and others – to shed light on why these people acted as they did towards Jesus. I think you might be surprised!

That’s what I want to encourage you to do. To check the facts. To understand the context. To know the real Jesus.

- A while ago, there was a special on TV called “World War II in Colour”. Most of us are used to seeing black and white footage of the War – but seeing rare colour footage makes it seem much more real.

I hope it will be like that as we flesh out a number of the personalities of the New Testament – and see them as real people.

Why will be bother? Well, it’s the same reason Luke gives in verse 4 of the introduction to his Gospel... He tells Theophilus –

3 ...it seemed good... to me to write an orderly account for you...

4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”

- So, if you are a Christian who already believes these things, it’s my hope that this series will strengthen your faith.

- If you are someone who is searching for the truth – it’s my hope that you will find what you are looking for.
- And if you are someone who has always been very sceptical about Jesus and the claims made for him – I hope that you will seriously examine the evidence – and this is a great place to start.

Genuine Christianity is not a philosophy or belief system – rather, it is bound up in the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Therefore, history, and the reliability of the records about Jesus is paramount.

I want to challenge you to take seriously these records of Jesus – because, if they are accurate and trustworthy, the implications are life-changing – and life saving.

Take a copy of Luke’s Gospel if you don;t have one – and join with us next Sunday... you’ll be very welcome as we explore these issues. If you can’t be there, please feel free to call me or e-mail me, and I can post or e-mail the talks to you, so you can continue the investigation yourself. We’re only too glad to help.

- In the end, it might not matter who you believe had the first TV from the moon (even though the truth is clear enough), but what will really matter is your attitude to Jesus of Nazareth. That has eternal consequences. Heaven or hell? The Bible says that destination, for you, depends entirely on your attitude to Jesus – so the sensible thing is to check the facts to help you make the right decision.

Next Sunday we look at the powerful king who did his very best to get rid of Jesus right at the beginning – Herod the Great – so we hope you can be with us then.