



The Oratoire, Aix-en-Provence

Sermon

24th December 2019

Set III: Isaiah 52.7-10; Hebrews 1.1-4; John 1.1-14

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There is a story – a true one, as it happens - about a vicar who went into a bookshop in December and found that the theology section had disappeared. When he asked what had happened to it, the assistant replied that it had been ‘moved for Christmas’.

Christmas does interrupt things, mostly in a good way. For many of us, it enables us to pause from the frenetic activity of our working lives and slow down, spending time with those we love, appreciating good things, reflecting on the past year and all that has changed, whether good or not so good. It’s a time of year when we greet people we don’t otherwise speak to, become more aware of our neighbours who are isolated, and (perhaps especially) of those who lack even the basic needs which most of us take for granted.

God interrupts us too, and in a good way. How often, if we look back, do we find moments when our lives took a shift in a better direction, or we became aware of a truth or insight that until then had been obscure to us. We sense a tugging at our sleeve, almost as though a voice was saying: ‘No, look over here.’ The poet and priest R S Thomas describes this sort of moment in his poem *The Bright Field*, when he writes:





‘Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle...’

It’s about being brought up short, by beauty or wonder. Our ability to wonder is God given and a blessing. Children are very good at it, in any season, but it’s always particularly special to see their excitement at Christmas, reminding us of how Christmas looks through the eyes of a child.

The Christmas story urges us to turn aside and look again at our understanding of the deepest truths of human existence. When I was young I recall hearing in carol services that St John was going to ‘unfold the great mystery of the Incarnation’. When he had finished doing it, although the beauty of the words never failed to move me, I wasn’t altogether sure if I was any closer to understanding the mystery. I suspect part of the difficulty was that, so far as I can recall, no one ever tried to explain what the expression ‘the Word’ meant. So here goes.

The author of the prologue to St John’s Gospel, writing from within the Jewish tradition, had the task of conveying to a largely Greek readership the significance of Jesus’s birth. Unlike the Jews, the Greeks had no expectation of a Messiah. So to write in terms of that promise being fulfilled – as the Gospels of Matthew and Luke do - would not have had much resonance for them. Instead, the author of the prologue articulated the significance of Jesus’s birth in terms of the Word.

The ‘Word’ was a concept common to both Jewish and Greek traditions. In the Old Testament, the word of God had called creation into being. Later the concept of the Word became associated with the Wisdom of God that brought the will of God to the hearts and minds of humanity. For the Greeks, the word, the *Logos*, was the principle of order under which the universe existed – the ‘reason’ of God, which also gave people knowledge of truth and the ability to judge between right



and wrong. Greeks were used to the idea that a greater reality lay behind this one – a world of ideal forms, glimpsed occasionally. The question was how to gain greater access to it.

Ingeniously, the writer of the prologue to St John's Gospel found a way of speaking about Christ's birth that was equally striking in the two cultures to which it was addressed, Jewish and Greek (and thus, by implication, for the whole world): 'the Word became flesh.' It was saying that the powerful, creative force which gives order to the universe and intelligence to human beings, was to be found in a person. It was saying that if we want to understand what this Word is like, we need look no further than Jesus of Nazareth. For in his birth, life, teaching, dying and rising, we will discover all we need to know about God.

That, broadly, was what the references to the Word were intended to convey. What do they mean for us today?

The miracle of Christmas is that it reminds us that we have to do with an incarnate God, who understands our human condition because he has shared it. The late Michael Mayne, once Dean of Westminster Abbey, used to speak in terms of God 'giving us his word'. Giving us his word both in the sense of giving us a truth he wants to share with us, and in the sense of our being able to trust him. In a piece he wrote about Christmas, Michael Mayne expressed in these terms what we may hear God saying in the incarnation of Christ, of God with us:

'Trust me. I give you my word that you are loved. Even when that doesn't seem to be possible: even when life is at its darkest. I am the God who is beside you and whose life is within you, beside you in your joys and in your afflictions, at all times and in all places, and beside you eventually in your dying and through and beyond your death. For I too, in my Word that



was once made flesh, know what it is to live, to suffer and to die. Trust me. I give you my word.’

That seems to me a concept worth moving the books in a bookshop for. And a beautiful assurance with which to begin a new year.

So this Christmas, let us welcome once more the Word made flesh, the child who offers us a uniquely intimate vision of the ultimate mystery we call God. Let us pause, turn aside to the miracle, and give thanks. Or, as those Greeks would put it, *efharisto*. Let us Eucharist.

Amen.