

Midnight Mass 2017 Eynsford John 1.1-14 (and Isaiah 52.7-10)

*God our Father, inspire our study of your written word,
that we may know your living Word, Jesus Christ. Amen*

Our Gospel reading, the majestic opening to the Fourth Gospel, is quite different from the nativity stories in some of the other gospels: the story of the angels and shepherds in Luke's Gospel; and the story of the Wise Men in Matthew's Gospel. While Mark's Gospel tells us nothing of Jesus' birth and childhood, and begins with his ministry.

It is generally thought that, by the time John's Gospel was written, accounts of Jesus' life and ministry were well known in the early Church. There was no need for yet another similar account to the first three Gospels. But there was a need for theological reflection on the meaning of it all – before all those who shared Jesus' ministry had died.

And so we have in this Prologue to John's Gospel an amazing insight into who Jesus really was and how it affects each of us even today. John's Gospel doesn't take us back to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. It goes beyond the scenes of history to the very beginning of time, to God the source of all that is and to Jesus' place in it.

So this probably isn't the sermon you're expecting for Midnight Mass, especially if you are a visitor here this evening. I won't be preaching about the baby in a manger, and angels singing 'Glory to God in the highest'. Instead I shall ask you to grapple with the big ideas in this passage, which has been called 'the most magnificent piece of religious literature ever written' (*The People's Bible Commentary, John by Richard Burrige, BRF p 30*). ...

Ideas about 'the Word', 'life', 'light' and 'children of God.' And in so doing, we shall explore Incarnational Theology.

The opening words of our passage 'In the beginning...' are the same as the opening words of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. There it says, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth'. Here it says, 'In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word was God... All things came into being through him.' Later it identifies Jesus with the Word. So it is saying that Jesus was there from the very beginning in the Godhead, before the world was made.

By calling Jesus the Word, John is using language and philosophical ideas that would have been familiar to his Greek readers. Like any good evangelist, the writer is presenting Jesus in terms that they would understand. The Word is the outward expression of the inner thought of God – the supreme means by which God has revealed himself to the world. We meet God most fully in the person of Jesus Christ.

'In him was life' (verse 4) – the very life-force within this beautiful world of God's creation. We recognise it in the miraculous birth of every new baby; in the laughter of children; the joy of birdsong; the frolicking of our pet dogs. Doctors and scientists study it. And 'our humanity can be explored in sculpture and paint, poetry and prose, dance and drama, music and song – because 'in him was life.' (*Burridge p 32*). We do not need to turn our back on the world to find God. 'Without him not one thing came into being' and 'What has come into being in him was life.' (v 3-4).

'And the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' (v4-5) Take any dark moment of history and there is always a light of goodness cutting through the gloom of evil and despair. The stories of heroism and self-sacrifice for others. The overcoming of barriers when people are faced with a common enemy. The empathy and urge to help when we see people in tears. The way our humanity reaches out to people in their suffering through voluntary work and charitable giving. The courage with which people can face serious illness. The way we often discover the strength of love in the darkest of times. At all times God's light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot extinguish it. That divine light has shone in the world from the beginning of creation. It's in our DNA, enlightening us through our reason and our consciences, shining out in our capacity to love and to give ourselves for others. We all have within us a divine spark of goodness and love.

Supremely, this was seen in the person of Jesus Christ. He overcame evil with good – even the darkness of death could not extinguish his light. Those who follow Jesus and walk in the light can become beacons to others, guiding them to God. St Paul says, 'Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.' (Ephesians 5.8-9)

Our reading goes on to say that God the Creator was born as a human being in the world he had created. 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' (v14) In a nutshell, this is the message of Christmas. God became one of us. He became 'incarnate', which literally means 'in the flesh'. As we sing:-

‘Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail th’incarnate Deity,
Pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus, Our Emmanuel.’ (*Hark the Herald angels sing*)
- Our ‘God with us.’

In becoming human for us, God blurred the edges between sacred and secular, between our physical, everyday lives and our religious lives. We discover that everywhere is holy ground and everything we do has the potential to be sacred because nothing is outside the realm of God’s loving care. There was a little book at the back of the church at the beginning of Advent, called ‘God with us’, helping us to prepare for Christmas. This quote caught my eye, and it’s relevant here:

‘Prayer is refusing to rush out the door in the morning before stopping to see the good things that shape and fill your life. It’s making time to see, what might otherwise remain unnoticed, the signs of God’s presence in the world and in the people you encounter today, and in your own life. The signs are there and you will see them if you open your eyes.’ (*God with us, Church House Publishing p9*).

You might think, on Christmas Day of all days, we will have a heightened sense of God’s presence. But in the rush of family, food and presents, we may need to make an extra effort to notice that God is with us.

(Continuing with our reading ...) Jesus came to his own people, the Jews, who had been prepared for the coming of a Saviour. But they did not recognise

their Messiah in the man from Nazareth and they rejected him. Throughout John's Gospel we see people turning away from Jesus. Only a small minority remained faithful. At one point, when 'many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him... Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'" (6.66-69) In Jesus, they had met with God. They saw his divine glory. The Jesus they knew was full of grace and truth.

We are told that 'to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.' (v12). And that promise is still on offer to us today, if we put our trust in him. May we receive Christ into our hearts this Christmastime. May he turn our darkness into light. And may we become beacons of love and hope for others.

Let us pray:

Light of the world,

Help us to know and believe in you,

That we may be children of God. Amen

(Burridge p 35 adapted)