

Sermon for Sunday 4th February:

+ Last Friday we celebrated Candlemas, the occasion when the infant Christ was presented in the Temple and Simeon and Anna acclaimed him as the Light of the World. Simeon's words as he gazed at God Incarnate cradled in his arms, have become the beautiful Nunc Dimittis which we hear at every Evensong: *Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace: according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen: thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people. To be a light to lighten the gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.*

Candlemas moves us on liturgically; as we celebrate that Christ the Light of the Word is in our midst, the Christmas season is finally behind us. The last discarded trees have disappeared from the streets, the fairy lights are back in the attic and as the cards go into the recycling box I often take a few minutes to look at them again, deciding which of this year's Old Master's nativity scenes I prefer. (This being the kind of card clergy receive!) They're all very beautiful but there is a tendency to depict highly stylised, sanitised images of the famous scene in the stable.

Our understanding of the traditional nativity scene originates in the first chapters of both Matthew and Luke's Gospels, where we read the familiar birth narrative. Unsurprisingly, the no frills Mark's Gospel bypasses Christ's birth and jumps in straightaway with the arrival of John the Baptist. But then the fourth Gospel, John's Gospel, has a completely different beginning which we hear as the Ninth Lesson in the service of Nine Lessons and Carols and as the Gospel reading on Christmas Eve. If we only had the beginning of John's Gospel our understanding of Christmas would be very different – we wouldn't have a baby in a manger, or shepherds, or kings.

It's generally agreed that John's Gospel was written in about the year 100, so a bit later than the other Gospels. The person who wrote it may or may not have been John, the beloved disciple who witnessed

Jesus' ministry first hand. Whether or not it was John, the person or people who wrote it and put it together were almost certainly Jewish, with a good understanding of both their own Jewish traditions and also those of the Hellenistic, or Greek, world. At this time around the year 100 the Jews who were Christians were experiencing difficulties balancing both faiths and many were facing persecution. Also Christianity was spreading and for those readers in the Hellenistic world a purely Jewish understanding of customs and traditions meant very little. So John's Gospel was born.

It seems odd to hear the first few verses of John chapter one read now, with Christmas only just over and the memory of it still fresh in our minds, and it's worth exploring why we think this particular passage has been appointed as the Gospel reading for today.

John's Gospel is just one of the 66 books of the Bible, and the start of any book sets the scene, makes the reader want to find out more. Think of some famous first lines: *Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.* Daphne du Maurier's wonderful novel, *Rebecca*. Or how about: *Take my camel, dear, said my Aunt Dot, as she climbed down from this animal on her return from High Mass.* Camel, Aunt Dot, high mass, what's going on here in Rose Macaulay's *The Towers of Trebizand*. Or, maybe my favourite because it's a wonderful book and I can picture a young Jeremy Irons: *'I have been here before,' I said; I had been there before; first with Sebastian more than twenty years ago on a cloudless day in June, when the ditches were creamy with meadowsweet and the air heavy with all the scents of summer; it was a day of peculiar splendour, and though I had been there so often, in so many moods, it was to that first visit that my heart returned on this, my latest.*" Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*.

John's Gospel starts *'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.'* Early Christians knew that the Word with a capital W referred to Christ, so these opening lines were setting a scene, and it was a scene that could never be

depicted on a Christmas card, because these words transport us way beyond our human frame of reference. As the mystery unfolds we're given clues, to lead us in the right direction. For example 'In the beginning' resonates with various parts of the Old Testament, particularly the first words of the first book of the Bible, Genesis 1: *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the waters.* From disorder – from a formless, dark void - God created everything. So for those first readers who were familiar with the Jewish scriptures the first words of John's Gospel alluded to God as they knew him: God of the universe, God of all creation and God bringing order to the chaos of pre-existence. But for Christians they also point to God's continuous creative action in the world. God's purpose in once again restoring order to a broken and chaotic situation. Once again the darkness of pre-existence, of chaos, is lit by God's creative gift to the world. As Simeon recognised at that first Candlemas, Christ the Light of the World now shines in the darkness.

In the turmoil and uncertainty of being a Christian in the first century, in the chaos and darkness of the world in almost every age, John Chapter 1 sweeps across the canvas with much broader brush strokes than those of the other three Gospels. Of course the recognition of Christ's humanity is essential. He was born in a stable, born of a woman, in a particular place, at a defined moment in history. But for Christians belief in Christ's humanity must be balanced by belief in his divinity, and here at the start of John's Gospel we have the Word with God at God's most awesome, magnificent and powerful. God of the cosmos, God of before time and for all time. God creating order out of chaos. God who is impossible for us to fully comprehend; cosmic images that challenge any artist's ability to sanitise or stylise.

This is difficult, because when confronted by God's power and glory the temptation for people of faith is to try to make God fit into the narrow sphere of our human comprehension. Think of poor Peter

who we'll hear about next Sunday, witnessing the Transfiguration, faced with the long-dead Elijah, Moses and an unrecognisable divinely Transfigured Jesus. Peter couldn't make head or tail of what was going on so he thought he'd freeze the moment by building shelters, herd all these perplexing characters into a nice safe box and buy some time, which might enable things to become clearer to his befuddled human mind.

Our powers of comprehension are stretched by this Gospel passage, and perhaps it's been chosen for today because we're at a pivotal point in the liturgical year. With the birth narratives behind us, John I sets the scene for what is to come. He tells us that when Christ was born, when the Word became flesh and he came to his own, his own people did not accept him. We're supposed to think, so what happens next? What does this mean for us?

What lies ahead is that the Word made flesh will perform miracles, he will heal and preach and teach. But he will also be despised and rejected. Though innocent, he will be sentenced to death and die on a cross. He will die for us, so that never again need we face the formless void of separation from God.

Our preparation for all that lies ahead, Lent, starts in ten days. Maybe this Gospel reading today is setting the scene as a timely reminder to us to examine what is awry in our lives, to plan ways of using Lent to increase our understanding of our faith, to pray and to give generously. In other words to sort out our lives, re-aligning our will with God's will for us. Lent is a time to reflect on God at his most magnificent and powerful, God of the cosmos, God of before time and all time. God who by sending us his Son, once again created order out of chaos. The light which brings life to the world.

As we will shortly say in the Eucharistic prayer: Great is the mystery of faith: Christ has died. Christ is Risen. Christ will come again. The mystery at the heart of our faith, the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, can never be depicted in a work of art,

or neatly boxed up and made to fit within the limited confines of our human understanding. To God be the glory. Amen.