

Christmas Midnight 2016

In the middle of the night on this Christmas Eve, we return to a time and to a moment, which is about our origins, our identity and our purpose in this world, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth: for, as Christians, this is the moment when our story begins. It is the point from which we orientate our lives, even now, over 2000 years later – for a golden thread of grace and truth has been woven inextricably through history. It has had and still has the power to guide, animate, enlighten and embolden us....

The opening verses of John's gospel tell us that the Word was "*in the beginning*" i.e. in the very beginning, even before creation itself! At first, in John chapter 1, this Word is spoken of in impersonal terms – as a 'creative force' (bringing things into being), as 'life', as 'light'; and yet, at the same time, it is referred to as 'He', as a person! The Word is impersonal and yet personal! This is a puzzle that unravels itself only as you read further into John's gospel. Keen readers of the gospel will recognise that the categories of 'light' and 'life' will come back again and again as metaphors, signifying the profound meaning and impact of the works and words and mission of Jesus. Thus, what may look like impersonal categories, here at the beginning of the gospel, actually point us firmly towards the very human life of Jesus, lived with grace and truth and given over to the empowerment of disciples and of us through the comfort and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, "greater love hath no one than to lay down their life for their friends." This was both his example, and his commandment to his companions and to us. He said, "you shall love one another as I have loved you".

As a term indicating the divine purpose for the world, 'the Word' or 'the word of God', does not make its first appearance in John's gospel. It is at the heart of the Hebrew bible, the Old Testament. Genesis begins with

God speaking, thus giving form in words to the outworking of divine activity in creation. The 'word' of God also comes to leaders and prophets who must articulate the divine purpose for the community they serve in the circumstances of their day. This is expressed very directly in Isaiah chapter 55 verse 11 when God speaks, "so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." And this sense that the word is active for good in the world is captured also in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 14, "the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart that you may do it!" This is echoed in one of Paul's letters, to the Christians in Thessalonica. In chapter 2 verse 13 he says, "when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it... as God's word, which is at work in you believers". The Word of God comes alive in the person of Jesus, disclosing the purposes of God for humanity and creation; and the Word comes alive in all of us who receive Him and live his way.

One of our challenges, then, is to try and discern what actions the word is inspiring in you and me that will bring fresh waves of grace and truth into the world around us?!... On this Christmas night I am not going to be despondent, rather, I want to be inspired by the joy and wonder of this night and the new potential that is being unlocked by the word becoming flesh and living among us. Yet when I look back across the year that is past, which has included the Paris and Nice, and now Berlin, attacks, the phenomenon of Brexit and the arrival of Donald Trump, the harsh turns of fortune experienced by thousands of migrants, from the Mediterranean Sea to the 'Jungle' in Calais, and the relentless playing out of intense conflict in Syria – when all these things are taken together and I think of their various impacts, the one word that comes to mind is 'fracturing'. In multiple ways these events and developments are laying us open, potentially, to a fracturing or the risk of fracturing in relationships trust and confidence, within communities and nations and between communities and nations. For example, the post-war European consensus is now

under real strain, also the UK as an entity is far less stable than before as internal national identities are becoming stronger, and we are hearing in the USA of a desire in the new administration to withdraw from many present corporate arrangements and deal only bilaterally, and the conflict in Syria is not only setting different local parties or factions against each other but has introduced a new dimension of international tension through the role being played by Russia. It feels as though people are being pulled or driven apart, or are pulling themselves back from a variety of relationships and alliances and making less secure new ones: at the very least this is creating instability and uncertainty.

Whether I am right or wrong about this, the good news is that people have not stopped reaching out to one another, and we won't! We will go on making our own secure new relationships and alliances and associations and friendships. In our city of Birmingham an important dimension of this is interreligious. One of Birmingham's upcoming young comedians Joe Lycett does a great skit on how Birmingham was recently spoken of in a USA news report as a 100% Muslim city, with the inference that this is somehow a bad thing or something to be concerned about. Recognising that this is far from factual, for a start, Joe Lycett goes on to say that in Birmingham we are not only accustomed to being a city of many religions with a large Muslim contingent, but we are proud of it! Birmingham wouldn't be Birmingham without our Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities, or without large numbers of people of Caribbean origin or Jews. He then proceeded to make fun of others in Birmingham who he thought we could do without!... but I'll let you find the rest of it on Youtube or Catch-up! His point, however, was a good one, and it came across very affirmatively in the light-hearted context of comedy, we are proud to be the diverse city we are. What we also know, is that in order to really benefit from cultural and religious diversity, we need to work at it and be willing to commit time and energy to making and fostering relationships across actual or perceived differences. I was heartened therefore to hear recently of a dynamic new initiative in the military context being pioneered

by a young RAF Flight Lieutenant called Harriet Tadikonda, who is the daughter of a fellow governor with me at Hallfield School. Following on from the experience of serving in Afghanistan, she decided to bring together forces personnel of different faiths, working through the HM Forces Chaplains of different faiths, to sing together as an expression of a common commitment to peace. The project was called 'One Voice' and it involved Harriet, who is a gifted musician, in writing a five movement symphony for performance by the group. Within the piece, sacred chants from the different faiths are skilfully interwoven into the singing, achieving an overt expression of each faith perspective. Her objective was, and is, to promote unity between the faiths and demonstrate that they speak with 'one voice'. The symphony culminates in the title song 'Path to Peace', and if you put it into Google, 'Music Video Path to Peace' you can hear it. Harriet's work could be seen as a very positive response to the contention of the theologian of religions Hans Kung, that 'there will be no peace between nations without peace between the religions'. Her project is indeed pioneering of deeper, stronger bonds of affection and trust.

With these matters in mind, I was very pleased that here at St George's this July we had a Christian-Muslim joint event for Remembering Srebrenica. This was a commemoration of the genocide perpetrated against Bosnian Muslims in the Bosnian War of the early 1990s around the town of Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia. Among many other things, what this occasioned for us here at St George's was a very rewarding opportunity to meet members of the Bosnian community in Birmingham and learn something of their very particular story.... In the aftermath of Brexit, it has come to light that reported hate crimes have increased significantly – they have increased by 40%. It would appear, that in the context of a distorted debate about immigration, some people have felt at liberty to express hateful and hurtful xenophobic sentiments with renewed venom. This is very worrying and is something we must live and work against. I was very heartened once again, therefore, when during our annual Christmas collection of toys for the local Karis Neighbour Scheme,

our efforts were augmented by a large and generous donation of toys from a group of Muslim parents and their friends from Hallfield School. In order to resist and see off any risk of fracturing, or distance in relationships, it is very important that slowly but surely we build on present trust and existing relationships by taking all available opportunities for collaboration and common action. That way we secure for ourselves a future that is stronger and more durable and gives us indeed a city to be proud of.

That the Word was made flesh and lived among us is the promise of the child of Bethlehem!... May we take this Christmas opportunity to welcome Him into our hearts and lives; for as John's gospel tells us, to those who will receive Him, there is given power "to become children of God", to be reborn through his gift of eternal life, starting now!

1705 words

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