

'The Word for Today'

Cathedral BCP Eucharist, 11:45 am, Monday 25th December, 2017

Christmas Day

Sermon by the Rev'd Dr Mike Kirby, Priest-Vicar (SSM), Chester Cathedral

Hebrews 1:1-12; John 1:1-14

May I speak now in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Ghost
Amen

The Word for today; the Word for today. What words might we have used today? In greeting each other on this Christmas morning – words of welcome coming here; words wishing each other a merry Christmas. All these words have been used for communication, for conveying meaning and information. Other forms are used too in today's connected world; much more than what one might see written or hear spoken. In my own world of medical science, my research interests have all been about communicating information – which words themselves do. My work has been about how we use medical images to both diagnose to the best of our abilities and to ensure that when we treat, we do so in the same way – to the best of our abilities. The better the image, the better, in certain ways, one can interpret what is going on and make better decisions. But it all depends upon two or three main elements; firstly, how good the image is (technically and within the laws of science); secondly how, either by ourselves or using a computer, we interpret that image to know what it is telling us, what it is communicating and thirdly, what we then do about it – how we act upon that information in the best way possible. It is a complicated process, one which keeps improving all the time as our scientific abilities change, and also how our

understanding of diagnosis and treatment changes. It is a daily challenge – in order to do the best for our patients.....as indeed it is a daily challenge for the Word of God, how we detect it, then interpret it and finally what we do about it.

Our gospel passage on this Christmas morning, this new day, is perhaps one of the most famous parts of scripture – and perhaps one of the most challenging.....but no more so than the challenges we all face in the stuff of our daily lives. Unlike the other three evangelists, John sets out his interpretation of the gospel message in a radically different way – as one of my bible tutors in Cambridge once said, and no doubt you might see in one of our regular Christmas films, the Wizard of Oz, as Dorothy says to her dog Toto.....we're definitely not in Kansas anymore! Scholars liken the opening verses of John to that of a musical overture – setting the scene for the story which will unfold; one in which the main message, the main word, is transcendent and eternal.....applicable across all times, not just for this Christmas day.

Subtle imagery is used to highlight the main themes – imagery which perhaps the Jewish culture would have been familiar with; darkness, light and life, elements of creation which become spiritual realities. Light and life are created in the beginning – in mechanistic ways which we are still scientifically trying to hypothesize about, model and understand. But John gives it meaning rather than mechanism – in illustrating it as the Word of God, which is there before and throughout creation, to the very present. Light brings about the visible glory of that Word; but it is through the Word, through the information it communicates, by both light and life, that the invisible and unheard God is revealed. So the image is there, created in the best way possible by the Word of God; one which is not just at the point of creation of the universe, but also manifest in the incarnation

of Jesus in Bethlehem as we remember this day – something which is also eternal to the ends of time.....which still needs interpreting for communication to take place, for information to be conveyed; and, even more challenging, for then action to be taken.

For John, the Word has function, one which is multi-faceted; firstly as the very instrument of creation of all that we know of, through the Big Bang and evolution, to our very present day; but secondly it is also the precursor, the fountainhead which makes creation possible and can transform, in the same way energy does, into different forms. If this is true, it means that the whole of creation, every fibre of it, is coded with God's fingerprints – God's DNA runs through everything we see and feel and touch and taste and hear. It is all stamped by God's Word in some way, at its heart. As the scholars put it, the Word is both the instrument of creation, but also a model for creation; for creation to emulate and copy. So, the image is there, created in the first place – but how do we read it, or interpret it truly; and then, perhaps more importantly, do something from what we see?

Well perhaps the blueprint for what we might do was given to us this day, two thousand or so years ago....through the birth of Jesus. For in that amazing act, God's DNA within creation was made even more obvious through the incarnation of Jesus, the true light which enlightens everyone, coming physically into the world. Going back to the passage of John's gospel, some scholars feel that the actions described in verses 9-11 represent the presence of God, the Word, in Israel during the times of the Old Testament – a Word rejected by many, but followed by a faithful few, the Remnant. However, most feel that it is more likely to be the birth and works of Jesus – culminating in verse 14 that the Word did indeed become flesh, in the birth of Jesus. From that perspective, here was the birth of the

Son of God – this day that we celebrate today – the Word which was made flesh and became the most obvious model for us as humankind; by becoming one of us, living amongst us, sharing the Word with us, showing us a foretaste of the Word in its best manifestation as God’s kingdom through his teaching and his actions; but suffering too in the same way we do in our human frailty.....and then ultimately giving his life others – for us; to show that the Word is indeed eternal by rising to new life. It was a very earthly cycle of life; but spiritually it is a cycle which we can go through in ways small and large, day by day, month by month, year by year.....but only if we choose to interpret the image and act upon what it communicates to us.

For we do have that challenge and we can make it happen. From the rejoicing of what we know happened through the birth of Jesus, celebrating as I hope we all will do on this day in lots of different ways with friends, families and loved ones, we are (as in my scientific life) presented with an image. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us as an enhancement, a sharpening of that image – to show in clear detail what God’s Word can do, what it means, what is in the DNA of all of creation. And what we see is indeed glorious and we should duly rejoice. But as with any image, we need to interpret it and perhaps do something from what we see. Like a medical image, its job isn’t finished by just the manifestation of the image.....that isn’t job done; it is only partly done. One must then interpret it, try to understand what is going on – and then take some action from it.

And this is where it is our choice, a choice where God does not force us to do anything with the image, if we don’t want to. We can stand and admire and look upon it; or we can allow it to communicate information to us. What does it say to us, the image of the Word of God – through creation, through the life of Christ? What do we see

and interpret there? This isn't just a one off process – it should be a daily process – the Word for today; for if God's fingerprints are throughout creation – Jesus' story is not just a passage of history....but a real, living, day-to-day occurrence. We can look back on the story and life of Jesus; and see the imprints of the Word there AND ALSO in the lives of people around us – people of our own faith, but also people of different faiths and people of no particular faith. Let us, in humility, see, interpret and recognise the goodness, the love that we see in the whole world all around us – that which we also saw in Jesus' own life.

So, this Christmastide, may our prayer be we all have a wonderful Merry Christmas, rejoicing in the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us in the divine Jesus Christ; a real, earthly, human model for us of the Word of God. But also let our prayer be that we then take the image presented and interpret it for our own lives; reflecting upon how the Word can become flesh incarnate through our very selves – and then also pray that that interpretation is transformed into action by what we say and do; that we all do at least something from the interpretation. And in so doing, the Word indeed will become the Word for today – and continue to dwell among us; full of grace and truth. Merry Christmas!

Amen.