

Christmas 2020 Set III

The prologue to the *Gospel according to St John* has two very distinct themes. The first is creation and the second covenant - sacred agreement. John begins 'In the beginning was the word', and takes us immediately to the beginning of the book *Genesis* - the 'Book of Beginnings', when God spoke and things happened. Words can be very dangerous things, because they are so easily misunderstood. Perhaps today they are more dangerous than ever - because we don't actually speak them - we type them out and whizz them off as an e-mail, a tweet or some other form of electronic communication - we think we have said something quite plainly, the recipient interprets what we have written in a different way, the misunderstanding is magnified by an angry response - and all because we don't actually talk to each other face to face. And can we talk to God, face to face? Clearly not. But the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that God had tried to keep in touch with his people. 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets.' Abraham, at the oaks of Mamre; Moses, at the burning bush and on Mount Sinai; Samuel, as a child in the middle of the night; Elijah at the mouth of a cave where he was hiding in the sound of

utter silence - they all tried to teach the people how to live as children of God - and then there are the prophets who wrote about God and his hopes for his people - Isaiah, Jeremiah, the writers of the Psalms - God spoke through them, and many others, some people listened but many turned their backs, closed their ears, and did things their own way.

God's attempts at communicating his nature and his truth to mankind have met with many misinterpretations. It is not that he can't make himself understood, it is that many people don't like what they hear. Indeed, although we say that human beings are made in the image of God, many want to make God in their own image - I am proud, vengeful and arrogant - so God must be proud, arrogant and vengeful - because I am made in his image. Our readings today show us a God who is making a supreme attempt at making himself understood. Jesus is God's supreme word to us - perhaps his final word. Centuries before Jesus was born, God had given his Law to his people through Moses. They consistently ignored or disobeyed it - but God had not given up. He sent prophets as his interpreters to call people back to his way, but they were constantly abused by the political and religious elite, because God's way wasn't their way.

And so he sends his Son, his Word - the perfect expression of God's will. The words say 'Love your neighbour' and we see Jesus touching lepers, healing sick women and children, eating with so called sinners. The words say 'God is love' and we see Jesus feeding the hungry, embracing children, forgiving those society thought unforgivable. The only people Jesus ever criticises are those he calls 'hypocrites', those who turn their backs on God's commands, because it makes them feel superior to others, as they put rules and regulations before people.

Today we do not simply celebrate an historic event - we face some vital truths about God. Christmas is like an acted parable - it tells us, in clear and simple terms, what would otherwise be hard to express. Christmas says that God will go to any length to save us and to reach out to us in love. He shows that love by becoming one of us.

And this is the message of Christmas - not that we wonder at God's acts, or rejoice in his words, but that we are called to act on what we have heard and seen. That is the challenge - will we listen to this Word which God has spoken, or will we simply rejoice in the joy of the season, admire the baby in the manger,

and then turn our backs on the 'hard sayings', about loving others, being generous, forgiving again and again, refusing to judge.

Jesus turned the values of his times on their head, and calls us now to do the same. Like him, and like his mother Mary (and, for that matter Joseph) we are called to make ourselves vulnerable in the service of God. Like him, we are not to favour one person above another, but to welcome each and every person we meet, and to share what we have - whether that is faith or material wealth - with them. But above all, we are to receive him, to welcome him, into our lives and homes, like the gift that he is.

The Christmas present of Jesus is a gift, a message, a divine word, to which we must respond in faith, in love, in thanksgiving.

We can all turn off a Christmas programme we don't want to watch - we can all say 'I'm not doing e-mails today' but this is a word which speaks itself to us every minute of every day - it is up to us to listen, to take note, to respond - and then we will behold the glory.