

Christmas 2 Year C 2022

IN THE BEGINNING - we recognise these words straight away, don't we?

'In the beginning' John tells us 'was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God'.

'In the beginning' the writer of the book *Genesis* tells us 'when God created the heavens and the earth . . . a wind from God swept over the face of the waters'.

In today's reading from the book *Ecclesiasticus* (AKA *Sirach*) we hear Wisdom (personified as a woman) telling us 'I came forth from the mouth of the Most High and covered the earth like a mist'. This is the Wisdom who was 'created . . . at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago' (Prov 8.22), who in Jewish tradition was identified with Torah and in the developing Christian tradition with Jesus.

Think on these things.

God's spirit sweeps over the face of the waters; out of the mouth of God, Wisdom covers the earth like a mist; God speaks his word and creation happens and God sees that all is good. God speaks his word, and his Word is with God and is God. We can only call it mystery. And it is out of this mystery that we

eventually discover Trinity. God the Creator, God the Word and Wisdom, God the Spirit - in the beginning - now - forever.

St Paul, an orthodox monotheistic Jew contemplates all this mystery and distils it into a great prayer of praise, a liturgical hymn of exaltation and gratitude, in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus. Writing from prison, he tells the Ephesians that they were chosen 'in Christ before the foundation of the world', that is - in the beginning! Imagine that - we were chosen - in the beginning. We have always been part of God's plan!

Stanza after stanza, he builds his prayer, his hymn, his liturgy, and it is full of joy and hope and certainty.

Just as the canticle we have said today, from the Wisdom of Solomon, has lead us out from slavery in Egypt into freedom in the land promised (the Exodus), so now Paul recounts a new exodus, release from the slavery of sin, and transfer into the love and forgiveness of God 'according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ'.

Amongst the gifts I was given this Christmas was a box full of little gifts - gifts for the bathroom, gifts for the kitchen, things for sharing and things for keeping for myself, things for instant consumption and some for long term enjoyment - every one

separately wrapped, each with its own greeting. Now, I am one of those infuriating people who like to have a good feel and try to guess what is inside a present, before I ultimately unwrap it, so it did take quite a while, but of course it was delightfully well worth the wait - and the effort.

St Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a bit like that - it begins with a bag full of gifts, openly named - and then you have to carefully unwrap everything, one chapter at a time. Today, we get the list of the gifts -

St Paul tells us - GOD  
has blessed us in Christ  
chose us in Christ  
destined us for adoption as his children  
freely bestowed glorious grace on us  
has given us redemption - forgiveness  
has lavished grace on us  
has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure  
has gathered up all things in (Christ)  
given us an inheritance (in Christ),

and all of this 'so that we might live for the praise of his glory', because 'we were marked for the seal of his Holy Spirit'.

Could we ever have dreamed of so many gifts?

This is God at work (not our doing) showering us with blessing upon blessing, in Christ, from 'before the foundation of the world', until its end - 'our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people'.

In Christ, Paul tells us, God has revealed the mystery of his will. This is the Christ who was, and is, and ever will be, the Word - the one who became flesh and lived amongst us, although 'lived' is a pretty poor translation of John's Greek - 'tabernacled' would be better, but we might not understand that, so how about 'pitched his tent amongst us', just as Wisdom pitched a tent in Zion.

During the Exodus, that long journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the land which God had promised to give them, God had travelled with his people. The people believed that God lived in the Ark of the Covenant, a box containing his commandments, his words, his wisdom. The Ark was housed in a tent made of sheep and goat skins, and was carried wherever the people went. But Moses had had to pitch the tent outside the camp of the Israelites because God was so angry with the people, after they

made the golden calf. 'I will not go among you' God says, 'or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people'. So Moses pitched the tent far off from the camp. He called it the tent of meeting, and if you wanted to talk to God or listen to God, you had to leave the security of the camp and venture into the wilderness, and risk God's wrath.

St John clearly recalls all this when he is writing his prologue, but now God does not live in a box in a tent outside the camp, nor in Wisdom's tent, but in a person called Jesus, who pitches his tent amongst us, each of us in our own exodus, our journey from the slavery of sin to forgiveness, from darkness into light, from fear into hope. And as we make that journey we encounter all those whom Jesus brings along with him, to journey with us. Jeremiah lists them as the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labour - in other words the marginalised, the outcast, the unacceptable, the undeserving - migrants, foreigners, asylum seekers, the unemployed and homeless - 'them' not 'us'. 'And their life shall become as a watered garden'. Now, that would be another wonderful Christmas present for God to give us - a watering can - so that those in need can move into a watered garden!

The adult Jesus does not seem to have had a home of his own. he stayed with Peter in Capernaum, with the seven times married Samaritan woman in Sychar, with Mary and Martha, with the wild animals of the wilderness, he ate with tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees - no permanent place to lay his head. He borrowed someone else's room for his last supper, and his body was laid in a tomb prepared for another man. All that because he chose to pitch his tent amongst us, in the guise of an unexpected, perhaps sometimes, unwelcome guest, but also as gracious, generous host. So many gifts, so many gifts - so that we might live to the praise of his glory.

You could go home today and read Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter by chapter - unwrapping all these gifts. What a wonderful way to spend Sunday afternoon.