

A Sermon preached by the Dean of Windsor, the Rt Reverend Dr Christopher Cocksworth, on Christmas Day 2023 at Mattins

The Readings:

Isaiah 52.1-7

John 1. 1-18

In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

A dilemma

May I share a theological dilemma that's been vexing me since I came to join this wonderful community of St George a few weeks ago? To put it rather grandly: it's the relationship between the eternal and the historical, eternity and the present difficulties of today.

Contrast of settings

For the last fifteen years I've celebrated Christmas in Coventry Cathedral looking out from the vast space of its new Cathedral, through the great glass West Screen, through to the ruins of the old Cathedral, destroyed by past war, and then on to the Council House where the struggles of present society are trashed out and policies for the future decided.

I couldn't escape the realities of history – the realities of human life, often dark and destructive, sometimes joyful and bright: the realities of the lives of the people whom I saw – literally – through the glass walking past the Cathedral with all their hopes and fears, their questing and searching.

Here, the exquisite medieval beauty of St George's Chapel is such a contrast to the brutality of Coventry's modernist Cathedral. It's not only the shape and detail of the architecture that lifts me into the eternal.

◇ I hear the song of the angels as the choir sings.

- ◇ I sense God's steadfastness throughout the ages in the unbroken tradition of prayer.
- ◇ At Holy Communion, I stand no longer looking out from the altar to the world passing by. I turn – literally – towards the altar and glimpse the everlasting glory of God.

The Prologue of John: from the general to the particular

The Prologue of John's Gospel – our Christmas reading – fits well with this place –

- ◇ its majestic Philosophical Sweeps about the Logos – the Word that enlightens all people;
- ◇ its tantalising Theological Proposals that the Word was both with God and is God;
- ◇ it's perennially interesting Themes of life, light and love.

But then it takes a turn: 'There was a man sent from God, whose name was John'. History comes into view. God sends a particular person, John the baptizer. Only, though, as a witness to the Light, someone who will speak of eternal things, just like any philosopher, even though clad in camels' hair.

Then there's another turn, a sharp turn, a down and dirty turn, a turn into the depths, into the darkness. The Word, says John, the Word who was with God and is God and through whom all things are created, the Word who is Life and Light and – implicitly – Love 'was made flesh and dwelt among us'.

'The one who is, *becomes*', said a bishop in the fourth century, who went on to say: 'The uncreated is created. The uncontainable is contained. . . I received, 'he mused, the image [of God] and did not protect it; he received a share in my flesh so that he might save the image and make deathless the flesh'.

The Word becomes flesh. Eternity enters history. God inhabits humanity and lives the life of a human person to the end of life and beyond, to make *deathless the flesh*, and give us everlasting life.

Christmas celebrates the intersection of divine eternity and human history in one life at one point in time so that every human life at every point of time – my life, your life – might encounter the God who has come to dwell among us.

The King's Speech

All this was brilliantly captured in this Chapel by The King in His first Christmas speech. His Majesty spoke of John's universal theme of light and of how he had seen this light of God displayed in so many ways by so many people of every faith and none over the last year.

And then, like the Prologue of John's Gospel, the King spoke more particularly, more personally about the moment in history he descended into the Chapel of the Manger in Bethlehem. 'It meant more to me than I can personally express', said The King, 'to stand on that spot where, as the Bible tells us, the Light that has come into the world was born'.

The Prologue of John: A Word before the words

The Prologue of John's Gospel is like a foreword to a book, a word at the beginning before the words that follow. John's foreword about the Word who dwells with God makes us wonder what words that Word will speak as he comes to dwell with us.

So allow me to jump a few verses ahead to the very first words that Jesus of Nazareth – the Word made flesh – speaks in John's Gospel.

Jesus meets some people along the road. They seem to be hanging around him, drawn in some way to his presence. Jesus speaks to them – words from the Word – and says simply, ‘What are you looking for?’.

They reply, perhaps a bit confused by his words, ‘We don’t know where you are staying, where you are dwelling’. To which Jesus says, invitingly, ‘Come and see’.

We know where Jesus dwells. We’ve read the Prologue. He dwells with God and he dwells with us – here in St George’s Windsor where history is held in eternity, ready to meet us, asking, invitingly, ‘What are you looking for?’.

What are we looking for?

What are we looking for, we human beings in our history?

We’re looking for what King Charles called in this awesome setting last Christmas, ‘Life-giving Light’: the light that Christmas proclaims has come into the world in Jesus Christ

Eternity is here in our history.

The Word has been made flesh.

Light in the darkness.

Life to the dying.

Love come down to the world – for you, for me.