

THE WORD MADE FLESH

Preached on Sunday 19th February 2006 (2nd Sunday before Lent) by Dr Simon Thorn
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Gospel Reading: JOHN Chapter 1 v1-14

Epistle: COLOSSIANS Chapter 1 v15-20

What remarkable imagery: Jesus is the invisible God made flesh, who makes peace through the blood of the cross.

What do you remember of your biology lessons at school? Was it looking at flowers and pollen under a microscope? Was it learning about fertilizers, root nodules and the nitrogen cycle? I bet it wasn't. Whether you liked it or loathed it, what you will remember, if you ever did biology, was dissection.

Still today, the power of seeing flesh and blood, the very stuff of life, grips us. My biology pupils are morbidly fascinated by it. Teenagers gawp at the endless diet of gore on TV, the gorier the better as far as I can make out. We all share the strongest of gut responses when we see flesh and blood in front of us, and we share a sense of discomfort when we see a skeleton stripped of its flesh and blood.

This is one of the reasons that Prof Richard Dawkins gives for finding the Christian Gospel revolting; not only are we asked to believe that God created humans, but that he actually became one and then expects us to eat him. Dawkins feels more comfortable denying that we and our world exist for a reason, and he is, thereby, more comfortable not having to understand why evolution is the working out of God's love for his creation.

Today's Gospel reading happens to be one of my favourite passages in Scripture. I always associate it with Advent carol services and Christmas. It resonates with those first ancient verses of Genesis where the story of God's unfolding and evolving creation of the world uncannily matches our modern scientifically-accepted explanation. First comes

light, the source of energy, then water and earth, representing the necessary chemicals of life, and then vegetation, perhaps the first photosynthesising bacteria and algae. Then follow the marine life-forms, simple terrestrial organisms and lastly the higher animals and Man, in God's own image.

In today's Gospel, St John tells us that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God. He teaches us that God is Love and, as an act of love, God must create in order to fulfil Love's purpose.

Thus the turning point in the world's history was when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God's purpose and mission of love is ultimately expressed in the incarnation. Our vocabulary seems so inadequate for the task when we listen to St John's words: "we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth"; or as St Paul writes: "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell".

St John in fact uses the literal description "put up his tent or tabernacled among us" which is translated in our modern version as "lived among us". For the Israelites, the Tabernacle was the tent which sheltered the Ark of the Covenant, the dwelling place of God, in their Exodus through the desert, until the building of the Temple at Jerusalem. St John is implying that the person of Jesus becomes the new Temple, and over his ministry Jesus explicitly assumes the authority of the Temple. Indeed Jesus says, later in the Gospel, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up."

The loving purpose of God is to bring us to himself, and to allow us to be fully human in his own image, in the way that he became fully human in Jesus Christ. St John puts it like this: "But to all that received him, he gave power to become the children of God." St Paul is more explicit that "through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, by making peace through the blood of his cross."

The incarnation of Christ, the Word, in Jesus makes this reconciliation possible. God in his love set us free in Creation, but grieves at our being lost like bewildered children

wandering off aimlessly. In our waywardness, as we stumble about in the dark, we have lost touch with God, our Father. However, as God himself experiences the vulnerability of being human, and shares our pain, and takes upon himself the Passion of his Son on the cross, the gulf which we call sin, that separates us and God, is at once bridged. Thus when God becomes fully human, we are able to become wholly divine. Atonement is achieved as we become members of his Church, the living Body of Christ.

As in the story of Genesis we have God giving light as his first gift in creation, so in St John's Gospel, Jesus is revealed as the true light that enlightens the world, but whose own people, the Jews, did not accept.

My father came to England as a German Jewish child refugee. He was sent to a Christian boarding school. He married a Christian and came along to church on Sundays throughout his life, but he never believed that Jesus was the Messiah, that the Word was made flesh in him. My father was not a practising Jew, but he was a good, spiritual and just man, perhaps what might have been described once as a God-fearing man, but he was not a Christian.

That was up until six years ago when my father was seventy-four. On Easter Day 2000, our family went to All Saints' Church in Mudeford. The vicar invited all denominations to take Communion. My father mischievously says that he must have misheard and thought the vicar had said "members of all religions". My father got up with us from the pew, and, just as you will in a moment, approached the Altar. He knelt and received the Body of Christ, the Word made flesh, in his hands and drank the precious blood, the blood of the Cross, and my father believed. As we left the Church he told the vicar what had happened, and asked to be baptised.

So there they are again, those potent biological symbols of flesh and blood which can so thoroughly revolt us, or mysteriously draw us in. As we come forward to receive the Blessed Sacrament, let us remember that from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace, the power to become children of God, the mystical Body of Christ himself.