

Second Sunday of Year B

14.1.18

Father Peter Groves

John 1.35-42

“In the beginning was the word.” The opening line of John’s gospel gives us perhaps the most influential and significant words ever written. So central are these words to Christian identity and teaching, that they enjoy a status above, and in many ways removed from, the rest of scripture. The passage that they introduce – the so-called Prologue to the Fourth Gospel – forms a kind of creed of its own, a summary of the basic claim of the Christian faith, that God has come among us, that the divine is become human. This is easily seen in churches such as this one, where the physical practice of worship is so highly valued. When we utter the words “The word became flesh, and dwelt among us”, we bow our heads – or, at Christmas time, we kneel – to hammer home the enormity of this seemingly simple phrase.

It is at Christmas time, of course, that we can expect to hear the beginning of John's gospel most frequently. Most Carol Services have John 1 as their final climactic reading. And it is, entirely appropriately, the gospel text for Christmas Day. But there is a danger that, by associating the words so strongly with the festive season, we divorce them from the rest of the gospel text, the text which makes up the day to day reality of the church's worshipping life. As is so often true, theologians don't exactly help. Scholars are quick to point out that the terminology of John's prologue – the language of the Word, or in Greek the logos – is not found anywhere else in the gospel text. Indeed, almost nothing in the rest of that text looks as if it emerged from the same mind or hand as those initial eighteen verses. It is easy to see why many have understood that prologue to be a later addition to the narrative text, perhaps something like what we would call an editorial introduction, a poetic summary of the ideas of the gospel in a form rather different from that which follows.

However, the point of an introduction is that it introduces something. It is not final. If we isolate those glorious words, and leave them behind as we take down our Christmas decorations, and pile away our copies of Carols for Choirs, then we have not begun to appreciate them. Again, as so often, King's College Cambridge has a lot to answer for. Those wretched introductions to the readings at the service of Nine Lessons and Carols culminate by prefacing John 1 in the following way: St John unfolds the great mystery of the incarnation. Oh dear. St John does nothing of the sort, or at least not in the passage about to be read. Apart from anything else, divine mystery is not something for human beings to unfold. The word and the works of God are not puzzles to be solved by an evangelistic Hercule Poirot, drawing together all Christians in the library only to reveal to our dismay that we are all guilty. Divine mystery and divine life are one and the same, and are infinitely beyond the ken of human finitude. Our goal is not to understand mystery, but to be drawn into it, to be united to the life of God by the very incarnation which

John proclaims in his prologue, but certainly does not unfold.

That is not to say, however, that no unfolding takes place. Lest you thought I hadn't had time to write a sermon and had picked up a spare one from Christmas, here is where this morning's gospel becomes central. For if we have separated the magical prologue to John from the stories which follow, we have little chance of appreciating those stories.

The encounter between Jesus and these early disciples is a mixture of the mundane and the bizarre. And quite deliberately so. Jesus is introduced to the two new followers by their existing leader, John the Baptist. John describes Jesus with an extraordinary epithet, one which we have come to take for granted. He points to him and says "Behold the lamb of God". He is indicating a person, whilst describing him as a sacrificial offering. This is far from normal. However, it is the combination

of normal and abnormal on which the fourth gospel rests, and so the narrative continues in a much more everyday style. The two disciples start following Jesus, and he turns with a straightforward question: “What are you looking for?” They answer just as straightforwardly “Teacher, where are you staying?” Two things to notice here: first, they call him Rabbi, teacher. In other words, they have vested authority in him before they have even met. But secondly, they ask him the dullest of questions. It is usually translated “Where are you staying”, but it might just as well be rendered “Where to you live?” It always reminds me of the early days of learning a foreign language, as if Jesus is expected to stop and answer “J’habite a Nazareth”, or “Ich wohne in Capernaum”.

But of course, he doesn’t tell them where he lives. He shows them. He does not impart information, he invites them to “Come and see”. It’s hard to imagine a more ordinary little phrase, and it’s hard to imagine an ordinary little phrase with greater significance or

import. Come and see. The prologue to the gospel introduces us to the mystery into which we are to be drawn. The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us. As you may know, that little verb dwelt means something like “pitched his tent among us”. You might hear preachers talk of the God’s “tabernacling” with his people. In Jesus Christ, the perfect utterance of love which is God himself has entered into our sphere, our world, our nature, and lived among us. That mystery is what the prologue to the gospel states: the word became flesh, and dwelt among us. But it is the rest of the gospel which shows this to be true, it is the following of the narrative, the beginning and continuation of the journey, which is the unfolding of the divine mystery. What it means to comprehend the doctrine of the incarnation is not to understand some complicated theological formula but to walk with Christ, to follow God’s lead as he pours his life out within and into the world he creates and saves.

So just as the phrase “The word became flesh” concentrates the truth of the divine mystery which Christianity proclaims, so that tiny little injunction, “Come and see”, crystallizes the reality of the Christian life. The gospel invites us to follow, to walk with Jesus, to come with him, and see the life which incarnates the love of the creator. To come to know God, to be united with the divine life and drawn into life eternal, is nothing other than to continue the journey, to walk from the cradle and the hillside and the Jordan, to Cana and Capernaum, to Siloam and Samaria, to Bethsaida and Bethany and Jerusalem. To live with Jesus as surely as he lives with us in the words of the gospel and the grace of the sacraments and the mess and the beauty of the world he created.

The miracle of the Word made Flesh is not an abstract idea. While we proclaim that truth in the wonder of the nativity, we do so knowing that our journey has just begun, that the one who makes his home among us does not leave us to our search, but invites us to his dwelling,

to a world transformed by love. The call of a disciple is the call to come and see.