

Year C Christmas 2

May the words that I speak and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Poetry – how important it is to you? My mother loved poetry. I still have a large, well-worn book of poetry which was presented to her as a prize when she had to leave school shortly after her 13th birthday. Her family could not afford the school uniform which she would have to wear if she continued her education; she had, needless to say, passed all the relevant exams to do this. I, too, love poetry and I found after our first daughter was born during the very hot summer of 1975 that one way to help her to sleep was to read poetry to her. Perhaps not what one should advocate.

Well, where is all this going? It's because we heard this morning one of the most poetic pieces of writing in the NT: the PROLOGUE from John's Gospel. I think that after the hosts of Angels startling unsuspecting shepherds on a hill side and encouraging them to leave their flocks to trek into Bethlehem; after a donkey ride for a very pregnant mother who is then forced to give birth in a cave surrounded presumably by livestock, it is good to get closer to what the first Christmas was really about.

John, in a poem that he didn't write but probably adapted to suit his message, tried to describe not the HOW, but WHY, God in the person of Jesus came to join us in His creation. Our author uses a title for Jesus which is unique to this gospel: Christ is described as *THE WORD*. For the Jews, WORDS [in the Hebrew language] were very precious, because this language has a very small vocabulary.

The poem begins:

In the beginning was the word

And the word was with God

And the word was God.

This repetition of *THE WORD* builds up to where *The word* becomes synonymous with the Godhead. Our author may have used this title for Jesus because it is something both Greeks and Jews could understand. *The Word* or *Logos* in Greek Philosophy represented the CONSTANT within an ever-changing universe. John goes on to reflect that although Christ appeared among us at a given point in time, he had, in fact, as part of the Godhead, been there for all time and was there at the of the creation of the world.

For the Jews, this message would have been clear to them from the first three words of the prologue, because it reflects the creation narrative found in the TORAH. In Genesis chapter 1 and verse 1 we read: *In the beginning God created the heavens; and the earth was formless and darkness covered the face of the deep.* And then the first act of creation occurred. GOD SPOKE creation into being. He said: *let there be light.*

This is exactly what is being described in these first verses of John's gospel. Look also at the familiar carol we have just sung where in the final verse it says: *Light and life to all he brings.* Creation is being *reformed*; the spiritual darkness that humanity has been stumbling around in is destroyed by Christ's birth, because in HIM was LIFE and the life was/is the light of the world.

Quoting again from John: *The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.* Christ has given us a new life, a new way of living. And returning to the final verse of *Hark the Herald Angels sing*, it says Christ has come *to raise the sons (and daughters) of earth, Born to give US SECOND BIRTH.* And John tells us what this means: a little further into his gospel John explains what this can mean for us if we want to become one of his followers.

We have the story of Nicodemus. His story begins with him seeking Jesus at night so that his fellow members of the Sanhedrin [The Jewish High Court] will not expel him. He doesn't want to lose his status in society, or perhaps admit to himself that even as a leading Pharisee, a religious teacher and expert on Jewish religious law, he doesn't really know where his faith is leading him. It's interesting that, according to John Robinson, Nicodemus is one of the few characters in the gospels whom we know, from contemporary Jewish records, actually existed at the time of Jesus. He is each one of us, and we can see in the interview with Jesus that he is offered a new beginning, to be born again into God's family by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are not told what happened after that clandestine meeting with Jesus at night; but we do find him mentioned much later after Jesus had been crucified, going with Joseph of Arimathea to ask Pilate for permission to remove the body from the place of crucifixion and bury him. So something must have happened to do such a public thing

After the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, we have perhaps the most famous verse in the NT, which I am going to paraphrase: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only son [to be born as one of us and live amongst us] so that everyone whom believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.*

This is the message of Christmas, not just a happy family celebration, sending cards, putting up decorations, singing carols about a baby born in a stable 2,000 years ago, although this is all very lovely and enjoyable. But unlike the fairy lights and Christmas decorations, it is not something that can just be put away till next year. It has to mean something to us now on Sunday January 2nd, and on into 2022. Like Nicodemus, we have to be born again and birth Christ again into our world, every day, so that those around us can also experience his love and compassion in THEIR lives.

There is a lovely, ancient poem which expresses what I have tried to say this morning, and which I would like to share with you, but I would also like to suggest that while we are still in the season of Christmas, you reread for yourselves chapter three of John's Gospel and see where it takes YOU. The poem I want to leave with you is called *What good is it to me?*, written in the 13th century by Meister Eckhart:

What good is it to me
if this eternal birth of the divine son
takes place unceasingly,
but does not take place
within myself?

And what good is it to me,
if Mary is full of grace,
and if I am not also full of grace?

What good is it to me,
for the creator to give birth to a son
if I do not also give birth to him
in my time and my culture?

This then is the fullness of time
when the son of God is begotten in us.

In this birth you will discover all blessing,
but neglect this birth
and you will neglect all blessing.

Tend only to this birth in you,
and you will find there
all goodness and all consolation,
all delight, all being and all Truth

Amen