

In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness overcame it not. St. John 1:5

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After last night's Christmas Eve services, this morning's service is so quietly simple that it seems almost stark in comparison.

No angels; no shepherds; no heavenly choirs; no stars, no surly innkeepers, as we like to imagine; no sheep and oxen bending before Him in adoration.

In fact, it is as if we have left all the bright and shining images behind, for just a moment, that we might quietly reflect upon not the whole story but just one word in that story: that is, the Word made flesh.

I sometimes wonder whether or not that was what John was trying to do when, after so many years, he sat down to write his Gospel. Matthew and Luke had taken their turns decades before; and they had variously spoken of this remarkable birth and of all those who played some role in the story, whether minor or major.

But John offers us none of that in his very carefully crafted words. Having seen and touched and handled the Christ¹, having heard and read the stories of Christ's birth, John invites us to think about all of this, the birth and the angels and the shepherds and Mary and Joseph, from a much wider perspective; from a perspective wider than the stars themselves.

And although John writes with an incredible, almost stark, beauty, he never allows the beauty of those words to act as an excuse to shy away from the reasons that lie behind this birth. There is a no naivety, no blind optimism, no syrupy sentimentality, in what John writes.

John reminds us of something that we all know instinctively; of something that we see in every broken relationship; in every unforgiving word; in every hateful act; in every unresolved bitterness.

John reminds us that this birth happens because of this world's darkness, the darkness of this world which would have overwhelmed us long before now were this birth not to have happened.

For John, using words that seem to explode off the page, this is a cosmic battle between life (zoe - ζωή) and death (thanatos - θάνατος); between goodness (kalos - καλός) and evil (poneros - πονηρός); between darkness (skotia - σκοτία) and light (phos - φῶς); and we sit here this day, in effect, with ring side seats as this battle is waged both before us and for us.

But even as this battle is engaged, John also reminds us that the darkness will not and cannot win; that the light has come and the darkness, in all of its many forms, has not, and cannot, overcome it.

The ugliness and uncertainty of life can seem, at times, to be unrelenting. And

¹ 1John 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, **and our hands have handled**, of the Word of life;

there seems so often just two options before us: we can despair, we can give in or give up, we can just adopt the standards and styles of a broken bitter world; or we can try to pretend that none of it is true: we can focus on the lovely little trinkets that the marketers would tell us we must have and close our eyes to all the rest.

But, of course, God's chose neither of those options. He chose instead to enter into the darkness; to share it with us and for us; and to bring a light greater than all the darkness of this world and the human heart, put together.

And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

One of my favourite words in all of the New Testament is the word that gets translated as 'dwelt' in this morning's Gospel. It's the Greek word σκηνώω, and it literally means to pitch a tent, to encamp.

Now, on one level, it speaks to us of the culture from which this remarkable word arose: a context shaped by the experiences of the desert: an image familiar to a nomadic people, who for a time lived in one place but who, when conditions made it necessary, would move on to find another place to live. To live, to dwell, within such a context is quite literally a matter of pitching your tent. But on another level it also speaks to us of the way in which Christ identifies Himself with us. He has lived amongst us. He has walked in our shoes. He has shared our home life. He has been present in every moment of our lives. He has stood amongst us at every possible level.

What this tells us, more than anything else, is that we have a God who understands all of our experiences. Because He has chosen to share the human condition with us, He understands from within what it's like to be human, to struggle as we have to struggle; to live as we live. And what that means most of all is that there is nothing that you face today that is going to be outside of God's understanding.

Our celebrations at Christmas miss the point if we only stop to think of a newborn baby, lying in a manger, surrounded by the animals of the stable and his own loving parents. We even miss the point if we focus only on the words of the angels and the adoration of the shepherds. This king whose arrival is so joyfully announced, this child whose birth is attended by such images of homey comfort and love, is not just some new king who will one day rule the world with power and might. He is no more and no less than God Himself. He is God's Word, God's eternal self-expression, God's eternal self-revelation - IN HUMAN FLESH. He is God as God has never before been known.

And to hear once again John's words, as we hear them every Christmas morning, is to know the meaning of life at its most basic and profound level.

It is to know that the God who is unquestionably beyond our grasp and our understanding is willing to come to us when we are unable to go to Him.

It is to know that the God who has made us is also willing to re-make us.

It is to know that absolutely no part of life, no part of the struggles, the trials, the sorrows, the temptations that fill our lives, are beyond His power and His desire to heal and restore.

And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us

He is the Christ. He is God. And He comes to us this very day; in Word and Sacrament. O come, let us worship!