

Christmas (2/1/05)

“and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” (the Gospel).

Christmas imposes on us a lot of pictures - some of them holy, and a few of them useful in prayer (at least St. Francis thought so when he invented the Christmas crib).

Christmas imposes on us a lot of music - some of it holy, and not least the familiar hymns and carols which hark back to the Gospel stories of St. Matthew and St. Luke.

But St. John gives us something else, and not what the world wants to hear. He gives us not pictures or stories, but an analysis. People used to say he gave us a “spiritual gospel” but that isn’t quite the right distinction. All the gospels are spiritual, but in different ways. Just because I expound St. John today, it does not mean I despise the others. All the gospels are theological writings, but there are many ways of doing good theology (and even more ways of doing it badly).

In the beginning was the word: this is not Greek philosophy, but a very basic (one might say Jewish) analysis. What am I doing when I say something? Something which was me (my thought) goes out from me. This can be applied to God in Creation: “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made”; he spake, and it was done. So indeed *all things were made by him* - by God’s own word going forth from him. And of course in Genesis the first word, and the first creation, is “Let there be light”; and God divided the light and the darkness.

The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness overwhelmeth it not: you will realise that I think “comprehendeth” conveys the wrong meaning to us. The Gospel message is one of cosmic struggle; darkness is always trying to overwhelm the light, but light is God’s first making, and comes from his own being; darkness never quite succeeds. This is the history of the universe from its creation up to John the Baptist, the latest *witness of the light*. God has never ceased to sustain the order which he created by his Word.

The true light . . . coming into the world: “True” is a tricky word in St. John; perhaps we should say “real”. You have had over many generations the approximations, the people who give their evidence about the light, and now you have light itself - God’s own word which enlightens everything. St. John gives us no illusions; the world is a mess and ultimately can’t be put right from outside - only by the very way it was first made, by the word of God once spoken coming right into it again.

The world knew him not: St. John is no facile optimist. The coming of the Saviour into the world does not put everything to rights. Indeed, the main response is rejection. His own church, the people of Israel, reject him. For only “a remnant shall be saved”, those who are *born of God*. If we find ourselves few and alone in a hostile world which mocks or at best distorts everything we believe, that is what St. John warns us to expect.

The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us: At the Creation, it makes sense to imagine God’s word spoken from outside the world - how not, indeed, when it is that word which calls it into being? But not at Christmas. Some Jews believed that the world was made for man, so to rescue the world God must work from the centre out. And how other to do so than to take human nature into himself - for the Word to give himself the tangible form of a human being - and to work out the conflict with darkness amongst us, as one of us.

The many do not see it. But St. John on behalf of the Lord’s first followers gives his testimony: *we beheld his glory*. It is the Father’s glory, reflected in the word which the Father has uttered just as we may say that a son is exactly like his father.

That is roughly what St. John is telling us. If you can receive it and rejoice in it, splendid. If you prefer to take many of the same truths from “While shepherds watched their flocks by night”, do not be worried or ashamed. There are many ways of doing good theology.