

Sermon – Sunday 4th February 2018 – 9.30 am

Family holidays when I was a child were always camping holidays. To be honest I'm not a big fan of camping any more – I quite like having my own bathroom and being able to sleep on a bed instead of the ground. But there's something special about camping because of the proximity to other people. All our family had between us and the neighbouring families were a couple of layers of canvas. If you have an argument, everyone knows. However quietly you try to undo the zips for that middle of the night toilet expedition there's little doubt that half of the campsite hears you.

There's a camaraderie that goes with camping, too. Facilities have improved over the years, but I remember the 20p running out on my morning shower, leaving me to rinse the shampoo from my hair in the cold. And queuing to do the washing up, passing the time of day with others doing the same thing. And in the UK, where the weather is already a constant source of interest, camping takes it to a whole new level. Anyone who's been camping is very familiar with the patter of rain on canvas.

As a family we tended to have active holidays, spending very little time on the campsites during the day. But I do remember on one holiday getting very friendly with another family, who also had three children. And that wonderful way that you go in and out of each other's tents, playing games together and finding space away from parents.

This morning's gospel reading is perhaps one of the most familiar – especially so soon after Christmas. And sometimes familiarity prevents us from really thinking about it. That final phrase has always fascinated me. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us..." When we speak of someone living among us, we might think of moving into the house next door. Somewhere in the neighbourhood, perhaps. And yet nowadays it really isn't that unusual to barely know our neighbours. I remember the last time we had significant snow colleagues at work shared stories of speaking to their neighbours for the first time, years after moving in, as they helped clear the snow from one another's drives.

But when the Word became flesh – when God became human in Jesus – he didn't live among us in that detached, separate way. The Greek word which is translated here "lived among" and in some translations "dwelt among" is perhaps best translated "pitched his tent among". When God chose to be with us, to dwell among us, to share our humanity and our lives, it wasn't in the sense of buying the next door house with the safety and detachment of its own four walls. The image is much more like a campsite, where you have little privacy and lives blend together.

God's decision – and indeed God's desire – was to be with us in a very real, immediate way. This wasn't about dipping a toe in the water to see if he liked it, keeping the security of sufficient separation and independence. The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. Right here. To share in all that it means to be us – our pain, our joy, our frustrations, our kindnesses, our intolerance, our wisdom, our foolishness. This is where God chose to be. Right here. Unprotected.

I wonder what your reaction is to that reality. What does it feel like to know that God chooses to be here? With us. As we are.

Some of us might find that a challenging prospect. We might feel inadequate. We might wonder what God makes of a motley bunch like us. We might feel exposed, as though we'll be found out. As

though we're not good enough. A disappointment, perhaps. Or – and I'm asking each of us to be really honest with ourselves here – we might feel as though others would be found out.

The good news, of course, is that the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us just as we are. With, or even despite, all our idiosyncrasies. Jesus knows us and still wants to be with us. Remarkable, isn't it? Except it's not at all remarkable, because what God sees – and what we find it so hard to see – is just how beautiful we are. With all our idiosyncrasies.

There is more, though, and it's important. God chooses to be with all of us – and sees the beauty in all of us. And the call to each one of us is to do the same. To seek to see as God sees. We are called to look for the beauty in each other – even where we find that the hardest. Whether that's ourselves or other people. Take note of the words: "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Have we seen his glory, though? The call on us is to see, to notice, to look on the glory of God's creation with eyes of compassion and hearts full of love.

Although we may find it hard to believe that God chooses to be with us, that's not actually the hard part at all. It's not God's love that is in question. The question is how we will respond.

The word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. But if we continue to live behind our four walls in splendid isolation, how can we be touched by that? The question is not about whether God is prepared to take the risk – that risk has already been taken. The question is about us. Can we take the risk? Are we willing to be touched by God? Are we ready to let go of our own fixed ideas, our own understanding to let in something bigger?

And the starting point is as simple and as complicated as this. Are we prepared to dare to believe that the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. Here in Worcester Park. That everything about us – you and me, him over there, her in the corner – makes God want to be with us. Are we ready to dare to try to see as God sees – to find what there is to love in those we find it the hardest to love – even if that's ourselves?

If you think I'm trying to say it's easy, I can assure you I'm not. The writer of John's gospel knew that only too well. "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." There are reasons for self-protection; for maintaining our defences, our four walls, rather than risking campsite living. Many of us – most of us, perhaps – have been burnt in our vulnerability.

And yet if we dare to believe in a love that can overcome hate, in a light that overcomes the darkness, we too might have our understanding transformed. We might discover a truth we didn't know. A life that comes from God.

Amen