

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 7th February 2021
Second Sunday before Lent

Collect

Almighty God,
give us reverence for all creation
and respect for every person,
that we may mirror your likeness
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Colossians 1:15-20

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

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. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And 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.

Sermon

I think we can all agree that the start of this New Year hasn't been altogether auspicious. While we are probably all taking hope from the herculean effort being made as the vaccination programme is rolled out across the country, lockdown is undoubtedly taking its toll. Even for those of us who are not juggling home schooling and holding down a job, there is the challenge of social isolation. The scale of death means that thousands of people are experiencing bereavement, not to mention those struggling financially and unemployed. So when I first opened the lectionary to find that the gospel reading was John 1:1-14, I had to do a second take. Don't get me wrong, it's one of the most beautiful passages of scripture, yet it is first and foremost the reading we use for Midnight Communion on Christmas Eve. I really did wonder if I was finding myself in my very own Groundhog Day, forced to endure lockdown forever.

Happily I can confirm that it really is the 7th of February, the second Sunday before Lent – we haven't been transported back in time. And while it might feel like Groundhog Day in the sense that sadly we are still in lockdown – and likely to be so for some time to come – the days really are getting longer, and if you look very hard, you will see the nascent signs of spring.

There is an extraordinary gift to this reading appearing today. Arguably, if we really were to experience Groundhog Day – the same day over and over again – this is a pretty good passage to be listening to, day after day. It never ceases to have something to say; good news to bring into whatever we are experiencing. And perhaps there are things we miss when we hear it solely in the context of Christmas.

I know many people who would say that John is their favourite gospel. It has the advantage of being entirely different from the others. While scholars can trace commonalities between Mark, Matthew and Luke, suggesting that both Matthew and Luke used Mark as a basis for significant amounts of their gospels, John stands alone. It takes liberties with chronology, placing the cleansing of the Temple quite close to the beginning of Jesus's ministry. It has a very fluid sense of time, with Jesus's final days being drawn out over chapter after chapter. It is as though the writer put the brakes on part way through so that those final days are shown in slow motion, drawing attention to every detail. John rejects the idea of miracles, referring instead to "signs", and Jesus's teaching in John comes through "I am" statements rather than the familiar parables of Mark, Matthew and Luke. While every gospel has unique material, far more of the stories we hear in John are found in none of the other gospels.

So what is it that attracts us to John's gospel? Perhaps it is partly the uniqueness. It certainly stands out. But perhaps it also has something to do with the language John uses. While all of the gospel writers were undoubtedly theologians, speaking compellingly of God, John was also a poet. With his words he weaves images and ideas that transport us; that draw us deeper into both mystery and reality. That is the gift of the poet. That somehow their use of words is both ambiguous yet startlingly clear. What John speaks of is truth. Indeed he introduces us to truth. And that is something rather different from the facts.

In this opening passage of John's gospel, we are introduced to God's eternal Word. The Word that has existed for all time. The Word that found its human face in Jesus. There is deep theological thinking going on here, as John reminds us that Jesus is God – the Word was God – and that he existed before any created being. So, while Luke and Matthew quite rightly offer birth narratives for Jesus, demonstrating his humanity, John begins with his divinity. And he does so in a startling way. Because what John somehow explores through these opening words is the way that each one of us belongs to God.

Can you see how he does it? First, he uses that tiny yet profound word “with”. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was **with** God, and the Word was God. Already we are being introduced to the idea that relationship matters. In the very essence of God is relationship. Because the Word **is** God – they are the same in their God-ness – yet the Word is also **with** God, because relationship is in God’s very nature.

And if that isn’t enough, we then discover just how closely entwined we are in this divine existence. Because John tells us that “all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” Our existence is dependent on God. We exist because God wants us to. And, just as important, everything in existence is part of God’s creation. It’s at one and the same time both extraordinarily comforting, yet also slightly terrifying. We can recognise our identity as children of God in a very real sense. We can be assured that we are beloved. And at the same time we must remember that so is the rest of creation. Each and every individual – those we like and those we do not. Not to mention the entire planet.

One of the themes that runs through John’s gospel is darkness and light. Here, in the opening chapter, he connects light to life. Our life is a gift from God, and it has the capacity to bring light to the world. Gift and responsibility. So often there is a sense of both, not because we are not loved, but because with love there is response. The promise, though, is that ultimately the light will not be overcome. If ever there was a time that we need to hear that, perhaps this is it.

It’s important that we dwell just a little on the times in life that are the most challenging. For some of us this is one of those times; perhaps for others less so. There is little doubt that tragedy is a part of life. It’s not something that John shies away from. Just listen to his words about Jesus: “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.” The world has the capacity to reject its very creator. Suffering is something that Jesus understands intimately.

And yet the Word *did* become flesh. God chose to join us in our humanity. And not as a distant observer, but taking our form and substance – and living with us. Or, more accurately from the Greek translation, pitching a tent among us. If you weren’t yet convinced of God’s desire to live in relationship with us, perhaps this will help. You may or may not be a camper, but the thing about camping is that you tend to get to know your neighbours because there isn’t very much between you and them. And the other thing about camping is that, when we decide we’ve had enough, God chooses to come along too. To pack up the tent and stay with us. To keep trying to relate.

If you, like me, heard the gospel reading this morning and wondered whether something had gone wrong, perhaps you might now be realising just how good it is that John 1:1-14 has appeared once again. Reminding us about the true light in our darkness. And bringing the promise of God’s presence, with us until the end of time.

Amen