

Homily for The Second Sunday of Christmas (January 3rd 2021)

The Christmas feast is full of stories: stories of angels and a virgin and elderly parents suddenly blessed with a child; of shepherds and prophets and innkeepers; of kings and governors and Magi. It is a very visual tale, as we all know from countless nativity plays, a story with a clear beginning, and a middle and an end. Human beings are very much creatures of story, we love them and use them to pass on wisdom from one generation to the next, as well as using them to pass on our culture, our place in the world, to newcomers and to the young. When someone marries into a family they hear the familiar stories of past and present generations of the family again and again, until finally they become so familiar that they find they have become joined with their story. The telling of the yarns, and the listening to them, becomes itself a part of the story, and a new character has been drawn in.

So, each year as we celebrate Christmas we tell the story to the new generations, and to those who are new to the church and new to faith, so that little by little they find that they are becoming part of the great story, the story of the life of Christ that extends through every generation from now until the end of time. Stories really, really matter.

But stories come to life even more strongly when we ask ourselves what they mean. What was it all about? What does it tell me about who I am? Or about who I might one day become? What do these stories tell me about the family I am marrying into, about the person I am marrying, about the people our children may turn out to be? What is the story about? Reflecting on the meaning of stories takes us inside them, inside the lives of the characters, and we begin to understand them better. A story is a great thing, but it is doubly great when we stop to reflect on what might be going on within it. What does it mean? In the Gospel reading today, which is being read for the third time in nine days, so must be really important, we can eavesdrop on St John as he reflects on the meaning of the Christmas story. St Luke and St Matthew tell us what happened, but St John allows us to see his mind at work as he reflects on what it all means.

Who is Jesus, the child at the heart of the story? He is the word who was with God from the beginning. What was he doing at the beginning? He was the one through whom everything was created, a source of light and life. Who was this John the Baptist? He was a witness for the light. Who was John not? He was definitely not the light. What did Jesus do? He brought light to all people and gave them the chance to live as children of God. What happened at the heart of the story? The Word became flesh. What did we see? We saw his glory. What was the glory like? It was full of grace and full of truth. Who is he, then, this word? He is the one nearest to the Father's heart, the one who has introduced us to the Father.

And so John floats above the Christmas story – it is no coincidence that St John's symbol as a gospel writer is the eagle – he hovers above the nativity story and he sees how all the bits connect together, how all the people link together, he sees all the connections and, seeing the bigger picture, he has a deep understanding of

what it all means. This child, he can see, hidden in anonymity in an animal's stall in a strange city far from home is actually the one nearest to the Father's heart, the gateway to the Father, the one full of grace, full of truth. All the players in the Christmas story draw their significance from how they relate to Jesus. The angel announces him, the mother accepts him, the step-father protects him, the chorus of angels celebrate him, the shepherds wonder at him, Herod wants to kill him, the Magi worship him. No-one in the story makes any sense apart from Jesus. John hovers above the scene and sees how it all fits together.

At the start of a new year we would be wise to reflect on our own stories. To try and do as John does, to hover above them and examine them; to see what part our stories play in the story of Jesus Christ, how our stories intersect with his. How has my story been this year? Can I see where Jesus fits in? Is he at the centre, am I close to him, close to the one who is nearest to the Father's heart? Telling the story of my life in 2020, the oddest of odd years, what part does he play in it? What part would I like him to play in the story of 2021? When I look back on it in a year's time will he be the leading man, or a walk-on extra? Looking further on, when my days on earth are done and my story is complete, how will that story look? How will he feature in that longer story?

It is great to tell stories, and great to hear them. It is better still to reflect on what they mean, what they tell us about ourselves. But best of all is to look and see that my story and the story of Jesus Christ have become just one story.