

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Second Sunday of Christmas (Year C)
January 2nd 2022

In today's Mass we hear again the reading from Christmas morning, the great Prologue to the Gospel of St John. This is such an important passage of scripture that it bears repeating, and it is worth hearing it twice in just over a week. Those of you with long memories will remember that until the reforms of the last century this Gospel passage was read at the end of every Mass, it was for centuries seen as a sort of blessing, words spoken over the faithful to protect them, shield them, and help them live fruitful lives. If there was one passage of scripture that we might want to learn by heart, or pin to our notice boards, or fridge doors, this would be the one. It begins at the beginning, when there is nothing, nothing but God. From God there springs life, and that life springs into existence through the Word, who we know is Jesus Christ: *'all that came to be had life in him'*. Life is totally dependent on The Word: no Word, no life. But there is more. The Word does not just live at a distance from us, he decides to live among us, to make his home among us, to be made flesh among us. And so it is that, when profound silence covers all things and night was in the middle of its course, the all-powerful word bounds from Heaven's royal throne to be with us on earth (Entrance antiphon Wisdom 18.14-5).

The Word was, from the very beginning; through the Word all things come to be, and only through him is there any life – he is, by definition, the life-giver; and he is made flesh, he lives among us. The Prologue to the Gospel of St John makes very clear for us one essential truth, a truth that lies behind the Christmas mystery and indeed the whole of the Good News of Salvation. The simple truth is the heart of what we are celebrating in this season, and it is this: God and humanity belong together. It brings joy to the heart of God to bring joy to the heart of humanity, and what brings joy to the heart of humanity is to live close to God.

St Paul writes, in today's second reading, that God chose us to 'live through love in his presence' – God and humanity belong together.

This story goes back to the dawn of creation, when God made a garden for Adam and Eve, and in that garden they would meet with God and speak with him – God and humanity belong together.

Even when human beings chose to break this bond and to follow their own way, even when they behaved like petulant children and went off on their own to do their own thing and act as if God did not exist, still there was always someone, Noah, Abraham, Moses, someone who remembered and acted on a fundamental truth of human existence – God and humanity belong together.

And once Israel has a land of its own, and a king of its own, the people still have a tendency to wander off, to behave like the other nations, but it is never without a prophet, never

without at least one person who will call them back, remind them that without God they are nothing – remind them that God and humanity belong together.

And what is the message that Jesus brings? He reminds the people that they need to turn away from selfishness, from the crazy belief that they are the centre of the world, that every individual can manage perfectly well on their own, he calls them back from the brink and says to them ‘think again’ – God and humanity belong together.

As the angel of the Annunciation leaves and Mary is alone once again, she knows that something remarkable is happening. God and humanity belong together, and within her this idea is becoming fact.

Behind the wonder and the joy and the delight of the Christmas story lies this great truth: all is well, all is good, because God and humanity belong together and in the stable in Bethlehem this is exactly what has happened, they are one.

And now we come to what is, perhaps, the best bit of all. When a priest stands at that altar, and recites the words of Christ over ordinary bread and wine, brought here for just this purpose, the church is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and here on our altar comes Christ himself, so close to us; bread and wine become his body and his blood in the middle of our assembly; because God and humanity belong together. And for those of us who are able to approach the communion rail it gets better still, because God and humanity belong together and in Holy Communion this is exactly what happens, God and humanity become one.

So, what are we to say, what are we to do? What about us? Have we forgotten that God and humanity belong together? Do we live as if this were not so? Do we live as if he were an occasional visitor, or a sort of distant relative we drop in to see when we feel guilty? Or do we live each day under the protection of God, do we live always aware of his closeness, his concern for us, his interest in every aspect of our lives.

As the Christmas celebrations, in the secular world at least, begin to wind down, let's take this message away with us; let's not forget what we have been celebrating; let's not forget the ache in the heart of God, who knows that we so often look for happiness in the wrong places when in reality it is very simple: In the beginning was the word... the Word was made flesh and lived among us...' God and humanity belong together.