

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – Second Sunday before Lent**

**Zoom Service**

**4<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

*Canon David Pickering*

The opening and closing words of this morning's Gospel reading: ***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.***

What a rich and profound array of readings we have in our lectionary this morning. They truly enhance our Ministry of the Word with their deep and thought-provoking themes.

The Old Testament reading from Proverbs speaks of the creative wonder of God's Wisdom: ***Does not wisdom call and does not understanding raise her voice? The Lord created me at the beginning of his work.*** The psalm verses sing the praises of his wisdom. ***O Lord, how wonderful are your works! In wisdom you have made them all.*** In writing to the Colossians, St. Paul gives a profound theological exposition of the nature and meaning of Jesus Christ. ***He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible.***

The biblical scholar, Leslie Holden, writes of these words, ***'This passage cannot be said to lend itself to a ten-minutes' sermon, or to be heard, momentarily, between psalm and gospel.'*** Yet Paul's words, and those of the psalm and Proverbs, are only a preface to our gospel reading of St. John's Prologue: one of the most majestic passages in the whole of scripture.

John 1. 1 to 14 has a long and interesting liturgical history. Back in the twelfth century, priests were encouraged to use it as a private prayer at the end of the mass before they disrobed. To be said in Latin of course! In the 16th century it was incorporated as a final reading at the end of the mass, after the blessing,

and still in Latin. And was known as the Last Gospel. This practice found its way into Anglican worship among some high church celebrations of the Eucharist, but read in English, of course! (I suspect we have a member of our Zoom congregation this morning who remembers this; but I won't name him). The reading of the Last Gospel came to an end in 1964, when it was omitted in the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

But John's Prologue is still a key liturgical reading. In the Book of Common Prayer it is the set Gospel reading for Christmas Day. While in the Common Worship order for Christmas Day there is a choice of three Gospel readings, John's Prologue *must* be read at one of the services. In addition the Common Worship lectionary has it as the appointed passage on the second Sunday after Christmas in each year of the three-year cycle. The final verse, ***And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth*** is used for the Gospel proclamation through the Christmas season.

But what are we to make of the WORD, which was in the beginning, was with God, was God, from which everything was made, and became one of us in the historical figure, Jesus Christ? The opening verse of the Bible in the Old Testament can perhaps help us. John opens his Gospel with a reference to this mysterious Word - which was there from the very start: ***In the beginning was the Word***. Similarly, the first verse of Genesis opens with the same phrase: ***In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth***. In both texts the word ***beginning*** does not just have a simple sense of time; its meaning has more to do with something of principal importance. Genesis and John are not talking in historical terms, but about the fundamental substance which underlies everything. So John in the opening of his Prologue, like Genesis, is writing about the basic reality of all things. And what can be more basic and universal for us human beings than words? Everything has a name, a Word. So what lies behind everything we can name is ***the Word which was with God, and the Word was God***. It is God who is in and behind all things.

Yes, God is there in everything that is good and beneficial, but what about the negative and evil things of our world, of which we can name plenty at this time? God is there, though his presence and reality seem to be missing. Even on the Cross, Jesus cried, ***My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*** He was calling to what seemed, in that desperate time, to be his absent Father. But even in the darkest moments, God's presence can be restored.

Today's gospel presents us with a God who through his Word can be seen in all things, and is uniquely in Jesus Christ. And the words we speak and think day by day are a wonderful gift of God. How we choose them shapes and defines our lives, so perhaps we might put greater value on the words we use in everyday living. All our words, thoughts and conversations are framed by the words God has given us. And as he is the Word, he is present in them. When words are used in a negative or deceptive manner, then we are desecrating and negating God in our lives and the beauty of his creation. In the same way, all our positive words are expressions of God's presence in our lives and in our world. The Word is made flesh among us, and in us!

Amen.