**Rev. David Ford’s Sermon - 2nd before Lent: 7th February**

Christmas feels such a long time ago now, that you would be forgiven for wondering why our gospel reading today is the Prologue to St John's Gospel, most usually read on Christmas Day.

The reason is that today we stand at the mid-point in our journey through the Christian year from Advent to Pentecost. Our celebration of the incarnation was completed with the formal ending of the season of Christmas and Epiphany last Sunday with the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. You’ll remember Bev talking about Simeon and Anna, as models of eldership. Today, the liturgical year changes direction and focus, and begins instead to look forwards towards our long journey to the cross and beyond.

No reading more perfectly embraces the entirety of this journey than the beginning of St John's gospel that places the incarnation in its eternal context, both alpha and omega, beginning and end, and everything in between. And this theme is firmly reinforced by the other readings of the day whether we've heard from Proverbs or Paul's letter to the Colossians. For once there is no doubt at all as to the theme the lectionary compilers are keen for us to explore – God, Christ, Word, Wisdom – eternally present within and without the whole of creation from the beginning of time into time eternal.

You will have heard me preach before about the presence of evil in this world and our response to it in the name of Christ.

There are fewer opportunities afforded me by the lectionary simply to preach about the gifting of life itself, about the mystery of God's creative goodness and generosity to us, about the wonder, humility and thankfulness of unconditional divine love. So today is quite special.

Unlike the other gospel writers, John's gospel begins not with human time, but with divine, eternal time. Rosalind Brown has written this:

“The incarnation can be summed up in the eternal love of God, and God's desire to scoop us up into that love which is great beyond our comprehension.”

The patristic fathers of the church wrote about this in terms of the divinisation of humanity – God shares in our humanity so that we might share in God's divinity. An awesome idea if ever there was one.

The false separation of God and humanity is finally disposed of through the incarnation, that provides us with the unfathomable opportunity to glimpse God in humanity in this life, and share in that divinity for eternity in the life to come. This isn't a theology that reduces or diminishes God, but one that invites us to be elevated towards God. It is, at its heart, an invitation to be loved and to love.

The opening of John's gospel is something of a tongue twister and one can understand why many struggle to comprehend what John is trying to say. And perhaps it is for this reason that John ends the passage by falling back on a familiar analogy: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us; it was like a father's love for a son, full of grace and truth. Like father, like son. Most of us can grasp that.

If you have had the privilege of becoming a parent or grandparent or godparent you can probably relate to the enduring strength of an analogy that relates the love of God to the love of a parent. It is one of the reasons that so many people still bring their children to be baptised.

Therein lies a mixture of wanting to say thank you, of wanting to find a way to express what words cannot, of finding a way to leave the door open to the possibility of that which remains beyond all knowledge. I am not at all sure that we respond as well as we might to those deeply held and nervously expressed feelings of hope.

Love, of course, is not simply sentimental but deeply reciprocal and costly.

As we ponder the reality of God's love of us, a variety of themes might bubble to the surface. One is acceptance: the need to accept that we are loved, in need of love, and accepting of God's need of our love.

And that leads us to another theme, for the incarnation was designed to give us an opportunity to experience God's love by responding to God's love. God needs us as well as desires us.

Many faithful Christians get stuck at this point because to respond to God's love of us might lead us into uncharted territory where fear lurks and courage is seemingly absent.

God's love might change our lives in uncomfortable ways.

And this is the point we find ourselves at in the liturgical calendar. Divine love has been expressed in creation and in the gift of the baby, child, and then adult, Jesus. But the outworking of that love is yet to come as we slowly journey towards the cross and beyond.

The core question for us as Christians at this point in the church's year is whether we are prepared to continue with the Jesus journey to calvary and beyond as observers or as participants. Many faithful Christians journey through life never crossing over between these two stages of discipleship. It is one thing to acknowledge the truth of the gospel in one's heart and quite another to participate in the ongoing revelation of God's love - with all the implications that might carry in terms of service and sacrifice.

I draw attention to this distinction not to admonish anyone but simply to remind us all, regardless of what stage of life we have reached, that our spiritual development, our spiritual journey, is not yet over.

We are frequently reminded that everyone is born in the image of God. This idea carries with it a reverence for life and for the potential divinity of all that we are want to ignore at times when individuals make us feel uncomfortable or challenged.

I will never forget in a previous parish ignoring a vagrant ringing our door bell at 2am in the morning. I was simply too tired to be bothered. But that doesn't excuse my inability to respect the Christ in the stranger on that occasion. We have all got to try harder.

And that of course is the opportunity provided to us by Lent, which is just around the corner.

So, with ten days to go, now is the moment to think about your Lent and how you are going to make Lent different this year. Despite the pandemic there is still plenty going on – some of which is in our newsletters.

For now, let us remind ourselves of the words of the collect prayer for today that we’ve already heard – let us pray:

Almighty God

you have created the heavens and the earth

and made us in your own image:

teach us to discern your hand in all your works

and your likeness in all your children.

Amen.