

The light shines in the darkness

A sermon prepared by Lay Minister Dr Tony Lemon for the first Mass in celebration of the birth of Christ 24 December 2020

Refs: Isaiah 9, 2-4 and 6-7; St John 1, 1-14

On Christmas Eve we come to the end Advent, the season of waiting, the season of hope. This year, it has been very much a time of secular hopes as well: the hope that we and our loved ones would stay well; the hope that we could control the pandemic, that the NHS would be able to cope, and that other necessary treatment and surgery could go ahead; the hope that jobs could be saved and businesses stay solvent; the hope for effective vaccines; the hope that we should soon be back to normal, able to see loved ones, to meet in church again, to travel, to share meals, to go to the pub, to enjoy live theatre, music and sport – the list is endless.

Our Advent hope is different from all this. It is more than a hope, rather an *expectation*. This is captured well in a hymn that is well-known to Methodists but perhaps not to all of us – Henry Burton’s hymn, *‘There’s a light upon the mountains, and the day is at the spring’*. One of its verses begins *‘There’s a hush of expectation and a quiet in the air’* – a wonderful description of what the past four weeks have been all about. We have been preparing to celebrate anew an anniversary, the birth of a Saviour born to set his people free. Our Christian hope is certain and sure, ‘a lively hope’ in the words of the first letter of Peter, a hope sealed by the resurrection. Our holiday plans may have been cancelled, but Christmas has emphatically not been cancelled!

The Christian hope transcends time and space. It is a hope greater than the aspirations of this or any age, something that is wonderfully captured by the hymn *‘Of the Father’s love begotten’*: *‘ere the worlds began to be, He is Alpha and Omega, he the source, the ending he, of the things that are, that have been, and that future years shall see’*. These words convey a sense of ultimate and timeless reality, something we can all connect with, whatever our doubts. This is something reflected in very different ways in both our readings tonight, from Isaiah and from the Gospel of John, each of them wonderful examples of the Bible as great literature. Those words from Isaiah, made so familiar not only in our Christmas worship but through Handel’s *Messiah*: *‘a child has been born to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’* Many scholars believe that Isaiah’s majestic poem was probably written for the coronation of Hezekiah in 725 BC, at a time when there was reason to sing of victory and the end of oppression. But the language and imagery of Isaiah’s poem, with its transcendent terms for the new king and its picture of everlasting peace and justice, might equally suggest that it has no connection with specific historical events, but envisages a messianic age far beyond the present. No surprise, then, that they have – along with other well-known passages of Isaiah – become closely associated with fulfilment of the messianic hope in the birth of Jesus.

The Prologue to St. John’s gospel has long been my favourite passage in the Bible. When my family lived in Norfolk in the late 1960s, it often fell to me to read it at the carol service in our village chapel. Decades later I found myself doing the same for several years at the carol service in my college, and it was a real joy to do the same tonight. The theologian William Barclay describes this Prologue as *‘one of the greatest adventures of religious thought ever achieved by the mind of man’*. St. John’s gospel is different from the others, and has hidden depths of meaning: it has been described as a pool that’s safe for a child to paddle through but deep enough for an elephant to swim in. The Prologue is not just about the birth of Jesus, but about the full meaning of everything he was, and did, and is. The words *‘In the beginning’* immediately make us think back to Genesis, whose climax was the creation of human beings, in God’s image. John wants us to see this book as more than the story of one character in one place and one time, but the full story of God and the world: *its* climax is the arrival of a human being, the Word made flesh – the Word that challenged the darkness before creation and now challenges the darkness found, tragically, within creation itself. By choosing to speak of ‘the Word made flesh’, John is explaining who Jesus really is, in terms that bring together what is old and familiar

to the Jews – looking back to the prophets, to saints and pioneers who brought truth, reflecting God's light.

But John, who was living in Ephesus about the year 100 A.D., was concerned that his message should reach not only the Jews but also the Greeks. How could he construct it in a way that predisposed the Greeks to receive it? This could hardly be achieved by routing them through unfamiliar Jewish Messianic ideas. The Greek words for '*In the beginning*' also mean '*In principle*' – so to Greeks these words would convey not just the beginning of time, but the *root of the universe*: guiding them to think of what Bishop John Robinson famously called 'ultimate reality' in the 1960s, in his best-selling book *Honest to God*. The Greeks shared with the Jews a conception of the Word, although to Greeks it meant something quite different. Brilliantly, John's Prologue speaks to both. The Greek term for *word* is *Logos* – but *Logos* means both word and *reason*. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus had used *Logos* to mean the word, the *reason* of God: to Heraclitus this explained the principle of order under which the universe continued to exist, and also power that gave human beings reason, knowledge of truth and the ability to judge between right and wrong: the *Logos* was the mind of God controlling the world and every person in it. The Jewish philosopher Philo studied the wisdom of both the Jewish and Greek worlds, and said that the *Logos* was the thought of God stamped upon the world. So John in his Prologue was using the Word both to speak to the Jews in terms of their Messianic understanding and to the Greeks in terms of this concept of the *Logos*, telling them that the *Logos*, the ruling fact of the universe and self-expression of God, was revealed in Jesus, the Word made flesh. In this way he introduces to both cultures the main theme of his gospel, which is as true today as it was in the first century: if you want to know God, look to Jesus, who is the manifestation of God's word.

John's gospel is a very inclusive one. God's light has shone from the beginning, 'enlightens everyone' (v.9) – no one is without reason or conscience. John is in effect saying here that the voice of Christ is present in every person, whether they recognise it or not. All the wisdom of human traditions and faiths is needed to manifest the entire compass of God's light – and that light has to shine through the veils of prejudice and obsession which characterise different cultures and faiths. So often the light is unrecognised – as it was, tragically, by God's own people, Israel. The Jews were completely unable to receive the Word made flesh because its light was so different from anything to which their culture and faith had accustomed them. John's Gospel brings a universal message – 'The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world' (v.9); 'to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God' (v.12). But alongside this message the gospel paints a picture of general rejection by God's own people, and reception by only a few: returning to Handel's Messiah, 'he was despised and rejected'. John portrays a great drama of God and the world, of Jesus and Israel, of the Word who reveals the glory of God. But it is a drama in search of actors, now as it was when John wrote, and there are parts in this drama for you, for me, and for everyone. God has a role for all of us, if we are willing to play it. **Amen**