

1. I find the opening of John’s gospel – the prologue – which we heard again today an incredibly moving passage of scripture. It can make me quite emotional as I read it, if I really live into the enormity of what John is saying. It certainly has to be one of my favourite Bible passages. When I reflect on what the writer is really saying, I find it quite astonishing. Why so?

It’s generally believed that John was the last of the four gospels to be written. It could be dated anywhere between 50AD and 110AD. There are different schools of thought out there as to precisely who wrote it – was it John, the disciple, himself? Was it an editor within the ‘school of John’? We will never know the answer. But these days, it is generally viewed that each gospel was not the work of a single author, sitting at a desk, scribing alone. Rather, yes, maybe a gospel was led by its key author, but it is better understood as the work of a community – the Matthean community, or the Johannine community i.e. representative of the key events various communities specifically remembered of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

It’s also generally understood that the prologue of John was one of the latest parts of the gospel to be written. I have this image of a wisened old editor, maybe John himself, standing back after having all the writing in front of him, and saying, how do we introduce all this? All these miracles, all these amazing teachings, this frankly unbelievable (until we saw it for ourselves) ending with his death and then rising. How do we introduce this incredible story? And he boldly comes to the only conclusion he can see possible that logically makes sense of it all: this Jesus – this man we saw in flesh and blood – he can be nothing other than God! That is such a huge leap to make! No reasonable human would say this of anyone. But it is the only way John can make sense of all that has been seen and heard and experienced!

Sometimes, at school or university, I remember grappling and struggling maybe with writing an essay. I could not get my head around a topic. But I wrote down what I knew and it all seemed a bit hickled-dee-pickled-dee! But if I had a good teacher, they would read it and say something like, ‘I think you have it all there, but you need to draw out the key conclusion!’ And that teacher might help me realise what those key conclusions were. That feels a bit like how I imagine John completes the prologue we heard today (1.10, 14):

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

Friends, please hear me! This is earth-shattering news! No sensible person says that God can become human. If it wasn’t for the deep wisdom and incredible literary intelligence that this gospel writer displays, we would dismiss him as a madman! But the incarnation – that belief we hold that God became human and lived among us – is a central tenet of Christianity. We could go in all sorts of directions exploring its implications, but today I want to go in just three.

2. First, the incarnation gives us all dignity.

As many of you know, earlier this year my father died. He was a wonderful dad, and as a family we have been blessed in that we are all close. One of the surprising feelings and reflections I have had since then, is a deep sense of pride. I have sometimes said, ‘he left us a great legacy.’ He has been an inspiration for me. And I feel proud to be part of his – our – family. My point is this: my father’s good life has, I believe, bestowed dignity on all of us family, for feeling part of the same story. And that’s my Dad – he was a great man, I believe – but we know he had his flaws too! He was a regular human being! If the incarnation is true – if Jesus is all we read he was – God come as human - then this too tells us as fellow humans: we can be proud to be human! We are part of his family! Many people suffer a deep sense of insecurity. Perhaps you do. But John 1 tells us: No! You have dignity! You are part of Jesus’ family! As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:

*In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.*

When you go out of here today, you can hold your head high! And further: you can look on your fellow human – be they here in Menton, in Syria, in Russia, in China, in Ghana – you can look on your fellow human and say, ‘You have dignity too!’

3. Another thing the incarnation gives us is this: it tells us there is no such thing as a divide between the sacred and the secular! What John’s gospel grapples with is the fact that Jesus was clearly fully human – he ate, he slept, he was born in all the mess and noise of a regular human birth – and he was fully God – he did things beyond our wildest imaginations, most obviously and finally being raised from the dead. John never attempts to gloss over this bizarre juxtaposition of two truths which we struggle to put together. But he never denies it either: he leaves us this conundrum – Jesus was fully human and fully divine!

Sometimes people say to me, ‘Argh Chris., now you are a priest, you don’t need to worry about that sort of thing.... (maybe some aspect of more ‘regular human living’)!’ Indeed I struggle sometimes – someone only recently said to me, ‘but your job is to be saving souls, not getting your hands dirty with’. Well, there might need to be some prioritisation of tasks I turn to in my role, but I never want to become someone who is ‘holy’ and not ‘in the real world’. And neither should any of us.

The ecological crisis has come about in many ways because we haven’t believed that God is deeply involved – God can be no other, we learn in the incarnation – in all of creation. There is simply no split between the sacred in the secular. You cannot care for someone’s spirit and not be concerned about their material reality.

4. And that leads me to the final thing I want to mention today: the incarnation gives us a model for pastoral care and human relations.

Related to these first two ideas comes a third: that when we care for people, we cannot help but become involved. That is what compassion means: ‘com-passion’. We simply cannot care for people by being distant, or offering disembodied or uninvolved thoughts and ideas. That might be a form of advice, or teaching..... But it is not pastoral care! We know this. At the most superficial, we have all experienced talking with someone when we know their attention is really elsewhere; they are looking around the room, over their shoulder, at their phone..... they are not looking at you. Being present is our gift for each other! Similarly, more deeply, we know that our best friends and counsellors are those who deeply listen to us, hear us and feel our pain too! Henri Nouwen, the Dutch American Catholic priest, wrote:

‘When we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not-knowing, not-curing, not-healing, and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is the friend who cares.’

5. So may you know the truth of the incarnation this Christmas! The coming of Jesus gives you dignity! The coming of Jesus tells you all around you – all stuff – is worthy of your attention! The coming of Jesus tells you – you are loved, and this is how you love others!