

'THE WORD BECAME FLESH'

PREACHER : Canon Ralph Godsall, Precentor

Rochester Cathedral
Sunday, December 31st 2006
Sung Eucharist : 10.30am

The patron saint of brewers was appropriately a dissolute man. His mother loved him dearly. He was a sort of Christian, like many of us – half-believing, curious but not specially committed. One day he was sitting in the garden and heard from across a fence a child singing, 'Pick me up and read.' A book of the gospels lay on the bench. He picked it up and read; suddenly his life took off. He rapidly became a world famous scholar, teacher and pastor.

St Augustine (for it was he, not the Canterbury one but a bishop in North Africa) lived in a religious world very like ours – crammed with personal spiritualities and formal religions, fervent believers and calmer souls. Some committed to serving their neighbour; others anxious about their personal destiny. Then, as today, some longed for a revelation that would prove itself true.

The Christmas gospel cuts through all such expectations. 'The Word became flesh'. There is nothing more human than flesh: it is the basic animal stuff. To this the Christian message adds: only as a human being does Jesus reveal God. Divine glory is not alongside the flesh, like an attachment; divine presence is not inside the flesh for us to view as through a window; but God (the Word) becomes the flesh. Christmas is a magical and wondrous time. There are the stable and manger, animals and shepherds; the holy family and the angels. And while the angels 'keep their watch of wondering love', we see God's glory in the one who is full of grace and truth.

Grace. When we see that God is gracious, our life ceases to belong to us: it is no longer a possession but a gift. Human beings are complex creatures; daily we discover more about ourselves. We frenetically seek self-understanding, hoping that we shall be able to live better with one another as well as with ourselves.

For the past few months I have been attending the Grubb Institute, taking a break from the daily routine as Canon Precentor. At a meeting just before Christmas I said to my consultant, 'I have got to know the man with whom I will spend the rest of my life.' I meant, of course, myself. It's been a hard and good thing to do. But 'understanding' also risks dumbing oneself down.

We look for simple solutions to the dilemmas of living responsibly in communion with others. 'It's my genes' is a current favourite: but we were 'born **not** of blood' – great as these advances are, life cannot be reduced to genetics.

'It's what my parents did to me, how they brought me up': but we were 'born **not** of the will of the flesh' – parents and upbringing are fundamentally significant for the welfare of both individual and society. But you cannot blame heredity for who you are.

'Well, it's just me, my nature': but we were 'born **not** of the will of man' – of course, we have differing personalities, but they are not unchangeable, however much we learn of our individual make-up.

The gift of grace at Christmas is the 'right' to become children of God. The Human Rights Act came into force in the year 2000 and a new language of rights is rapidly emerging in the United Kingdom. It will gather further momentum when we celebrate the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade next March. The phrase 'human rights' has a noble history. But it risks being weakened by being casually extended. Adult rights are assigned to children, whose proper right is first to a childhood; animals have rights; even, some say, plants have rights. It is worrying, however, that we do not yet feel easy with the phrase 'human duties'.

Take a trivial example. When I travel by rail, I take my place as a 'customer' (I'm old enough to remember when I was a passenger!) and charters will tell me what my rights are. If my rights are not met, I can complain to a regulator. The railway company has corresponding duties to me. But something's missing: I am not reminded that I, too, have some responsibilities. I should behave courteously towards other passengers and staff. I should not put my feet on the seats and so on.

The Christmas gospel announces that the ultimate human right is given by God, not claimed by us. Our modern emphasis on claiming rights can only be a transition, a step towards a new and better grasp of our human duties and responsibilities. For if there is no obligation, where is humanity? If rights alone can be asserted, where is the work of care and the art of affection?

Relationships with one another are ultimately founded not on demanded rights but on our human duties. Such a world is still worth believing in, worth striving for, and worth praying for. It is the world where the Word became flesh.

And what of truth?

Eric James – you may have heard him on Radio 4's Thought for the Day – was once Chaplain of Trinity College, Cambridge, where there was a particularly eccentric don. One day they passed in the court. 'Eric', he said, 'what are you going to preach about at the beginning of term?' And without waiting for a reply, he said, 'For God's sake, don't just talk tripe about truth.' He meant there is a way of talking about truth that is too easy, too glib and too smooth, too lacking in challenge and demand. In the gospel, truth means an integrity that can be explored by others.

Throughout the forty days of Christmas we celebrate this integrity in the birth of Jesus: he was 'full of grace (self-giving) and truth (openness to scrutiny)'. In this Word made flesh God makes himself vulnerable. The one, who in secret we feared might always be watching and judging us, turns the tables: he now invites us to look at him and make our judgements about him.

The God whom we thought remote and passionless proves to be near and loving. The God who, so we thought, might do things to us, invites us instead to use him – and the cross becomes inevitable. In the one person of Jesus the themes of grace and truth are joined. They cannot be separated. Without truth, grace can be abused; without grace, truth can become oppressive.

On Wednesday night I was speaking to the Chair of Governors of a Church School in central London. She said something both deeply saddening and regrettably true: 'The most difficult parents', she said, 'are the professing Christians. They are aware of grace but treat it as a theory and possession; and truth becomes their private, unexamined belief, which they use as a weapon in any struggle to serve their own needs. The letter is often marked 'Confidential', but the

intention is to stir up malice by spreading it. The great religious sin is self-righteousness or hypocrisy.'

Jesus regularly condemns it. For those who so misappropriate grace, also pervert the truth, believing only in their privately constructed so-called absolute truth. They protect themselves from any vulnerability that integrity might bring. The gospel is perverted: under the guise of grace we find destruction; and under the banner of truth, the great deceit.

This is not what Christ was born for. It is not the faith: for it knows nothing of graciousness. And vulnerability is inconceivable. What for them does the way of the cross require?

Grace and truth: the signals of God, the necessary marks of the Christian. On that long summer's day, Augustine casually picked up the book and read. It changed him and in due course the world – the same should happen to you and me.

Because life is complex and rights are its currency, God needs people of grace. In a world where power and strength are treated as a form of right, God needs people of truth. In the world for which the Word became flesh, God needs us to bring hope, as we live the simplicity of his grace and hold faith in the vulnerability of the truth.

'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.' (John 1: 14)