

Bennochy church: 5th January 2020

John is a true theologian, and nowhere is that better expressed, than in the opening chapter of his gospel record. His record does not begin in Bethlehem, but at the very beginning of creation itself. Jesus is not expressed as the vulnerable child born in a stable, but described as the Word of God made flesh, source of all light and life. John says, *'The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out'*. Its flame is eternal. Shining through history. Glimpsed in times of darkness. Radiant, in the moments of God's revelation. As a star shone over Bethlehem.

Jesus shares this moment, not with his parents, or shepherds or Magi, but with a man named John. Jesus and John were actually cousins and shared similar birth stories. One is described as the light. The other, is the torch bearer.

In spite of all that God had done, people did not recognise the birth of Jesus, and that should not surprise us. The Word was in the world already, as a creative spirit, yet the world did not recognise him. In the obscurity of Bethlehem, apart from Herod, no one else seemed to notice. There were very few eyes raised, at the birth of this child.

In time, the Christmas story faded, and Jesus became just another carpenter's son in Nazareth. And even in his years of active ministry. Just three years, yes he turned the world upside

down, but at the same time, he was not received even by his own people. In the darkness, the light continued to shine.

John knew that some believed. His was the last gospel to be written, many decades after the death of Jesus. He writes, you who believe, are now children of God. Do you see what he is saying. You have been born in the same way as Jesus, not by natural means, for God himself is your father. I wonder, in these words is there just a little hint of the Christmas story?

Who then recognised the glory of this event? Glory had always been a symbol of God's presence. The glory of Mount Sinai, God hidden within the cloud. The Glory of God's presence as witnessed by ancient prophets in the temple; the glory of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, and, John's revelation of the New Jerusalem to come. Here is the astounding bit. John says to his readers, the eternal Word can now be seen, and like in the story of doubting Thomas, could even be touched. Never mind washing your hand, if you touched your sporting hero, what of the hand of Thomas, if he had actually placed his hands in the wounds of Christ.

The thing about incarnation, it is the idea of God living as part of his people and being seen. Eugene Peterson, who did the Message translation of scripture, describes it like this, 'God pitched his tent and lived amongst us'. Incarnation is about John shouting, *'There he is. He is the one I was talking about. Go and listen to him. See what he has to say. He has come after me*

but he is greater than I'. Why? Because if you have seen him, you have seen God. Now that was new. People believed that they could not see God and live. In the words of John, here is God walking the earth. Who has always been, but now as the light of the world, shines in the darkness.

I have always struggled with this idea of eternity. Existed before I was born, says John. No beginning. No end. Surely everything has to begin somewhere. Where did God begin? We try to describe God in our language, so that we can grasp some meaning of who he is. We try to describe God and we fail. You cannot measure God in time. We live within time. God does not.

In his prologue, John leaves us with a blessing. It is grace, he says. It is not deserved. If the ancient promises of God's blessings were contained in the law, now they have been revealed, seen in Jesus Christ. It is in him we will find grace and truth.

This is a passage of hope. Not optimism. But hope in God. Something to hold onto in the darkness. But not out of despair, but in faith, that God has not left the world spinning out of control. He is fully engaged as the 'Light of the world'. Fully incarnated, 'Full of grace and truth' and fully present as the eternal source of life. In this hope; justice and righteousness and all that we seek for our world, are not lost causes.

The temptation is to leave God to get on with it. We will not save the world. God will, but we are his church. We have to look, and follow. Stars have always been guiding lights and we have a particular light to follow. To do that, we need to take the risk of building the bridge, as we cross it. The German poet Friedrich Hölderlin said, *"But where there is danger, salvation also grows."*

In the movie *Indiana Jones and the last crusade*. Jones comes to a edge of a precipice overlooking a huge abyss. There is no apparent way across. Chased by his enemies, he must now cross over to save his father's life. He has a map that says there is a bridge to the other side. The problem is, he can't see it. He has no option but to take a step of faith, trusting the bridge is there. Fortunately for him, the bridge was there all along, and he is able, of course, to save the day.

From his perspective he could not see it. I wonder, if that is how, as a church, we see the future. Standing on the precipice, we see no way across. Hope is building the bridge, and faith is taking one step at a time, into the unknown. Knowing that the impossible, is where God begins. Amen.