

*Preached by the Revd Dr Michael Piret, Dean of Divinity, on Advent Sunday (27 November) 2011, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.*

The Gospel reading we just heard is about watchfulness. It strikes one of the great Advent themes: being on the lookout for the Day of Judgement. It's a call to live in a way that makes us ready for the light of truth to turn its full brightness on everything about us. We are to prepare, now, for the time when God's truth is all in all, when everyone will be seen exactly for what they are. I find that a frightening prospect; and most people would, I'm sure. Most of us would recognise at least something of ourselves in W.H. Auden's dismal assessment of the human race, when he wrote: 'We are not, any of us, very nice.'<sup>1</sup> This is why I'm glad Advent is not just about preparing for the time when we will be seen exactly for what we are. I'm glad it's also about starting to celebrate the fact that in Christ, we have been shown, truly and faithfully, what God is like.

'The Word was made Flesh.' In that statement you have the whole meaning of Christmas; and if you like, you can forget everything else. When we sing 'O Come All Ye Faithful' (as I do on about a hundred and forty-five different occasions each December) ... we hail Jesus as 'Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.' We hail him not as a grammatical word, not as a part of speech; but as the definitive expression of God's meaning – seen in a particular human life, at a particular time and place in history – yet also reaching *across* history, accessible to us all. When we call him 'Word of the Father,' we mean that in Jesus, we have the utterance of God's truth, in a form we can grasp and take hold of: as a person, who came into this world in flesh and blood to show us what God is like.

Near the beginning of the Letter to the Colossians there's a well-known passage, probably an early hymn, where Christ is described as 'the image of the invisible God,' 'the *ikon* of the invisible God.' Down through the ages, people who have believed this world has its origins in a mind-like intelligence (and most people have believed this, in most times and places) – people have tried to articulate what they think God is like. Every kind of believer tries, from the most sophisticated philosophers to the simplest of children. Humanity has always longed somehow to comprehend, to reach out and find *God*. The principal point and wonder of the season to come, the good news of Christmas, is that God has reached out and *found us*. When we talk about the first steps of getting to know people, we talk about putting names to faces. In the Word made Flesh, in Jesus of Nazareth, we are given a face to put to the name of God: a human face, to define and focus, for us, the invisible reality of God.

So what do we see, what do we learn, when we look into that face which is 'the *ikon* of the invisible God'? If God's Word has been made Flesh in Jesus, if the meaning and purposes of God have been uniquely distilled in this particular human life, what is conveyed in that life? When we look, what do we see?

We see many things that do not sit comfortably alongside our preconceptions about the glory and majesty of God. The indignity even when he was born, of being put to bed in a trough in a stable. The irony of a life so misunderstood that his family once came to try to take charge of him, when people thought he was 'beside himself,' maybe 'out of his mind.' Where was the majesty in the way he was misunderstood, so consistently, by his disciples, who often seem to have been dependable in only one thing: in getting the wrong end of every

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<sup>1</sup> 'Heresies,' in *Forewords and Afterwords* (Vintage Books edition, New York, 1974), p. 48.

stick – and who deserted him when things were at their worst. When we look at that life as the ikon of the invisible God, one thing we learn is that God has no aversion to humility; God does not stand aloof from humility, obscurity, or even contempt. We learn that God is not above keeping company with pathetically undependable people like the disciples – or like us. Those, I would say, are tidings of comfort and joy.

When we look at this life we also find perfect wisdom, a ministry of teaching that goes beyond our expectations and desires. Beyond *expectation* in a challenging way: because Christ blows apart so much of the complacency, judgmentalism, and self-justification that mark our dealings with others. Beyond *desire* in the best sense: because the wisdom of Christ is always (awkwardly) way ahead of us, he is always taking us outside the comfort zone of what we want to hear, on to the alien ground of risk, of forgiveness, of reconciliation – which are so often the only way forward, for broken humanity in a hurting world. These, too, are tidings of comfort and joy; even if we do our best, time and time again, not to hear them.

When we look at the Word made Flesh in Christ, that life speaks of a God who wants us to be made whole. Jesus was a magnet for crowds not just because of his teaching, but because his teaching was accompanied by certain signs: by the power to heal, and transform human distress. He poured out his energy on the afflicted, the hungry, the needy, the rejected: not only teaching about the kingdom of God but showing people that the kingdom was in the midst of them, even within them. And because of what he endured in his life, his face must have reflected back, to those around him, the marks of human suffering. In the end it was the height of his own vulnerability, the time of his passion and death, which was the height of his work of healing – through the power of sacrifice undertaken out of love, reconciling to himself all things, ‘making peace by the blood of his cross.’

If we look at the life of Christ as the ikon of the invisible God, we learn that love is the meaning that life. A love that went down into what can be (for us) the deepest fear of all: the fear of death – or more properly the fear of meaninglessness, of oblivion, of emptiness, that we project onto death. In Christ we see a love that experienced the full force of death, that was immersed in the darkness of death, in order to win the victory of life, of hope, of light. No wonder that for those who look to him with the eyes of faith, these are tidings of comfort and joy. In him we see the image of a God whose love is stronger than death, a God who longs to heal us and make us whole, whose kingdom is within us, whose purpose is to lead us forward in righteousness, yet whose humility means he is not above keeping company with us as we are now ... even if it is fair to say that ‘We are not, any of us, very nice.’ God’s grace is greater than any of our failings. God’s love, compassion, purpose, wisdom – God’s Word – has been made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have beheld his glory: ‘glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.’

And so, with those words about the real meaning of Christmas, I send you out now as sheep in the midst of wolves: into a world of tinsel, plastic trees, tacky jumpers, long lists of people to whom you must send a Christmas card, cut-rate-bargains, fairy lights that don’t work, silly presents you must pretend to like, a gluttonous dinner, or two, or three – all these things which have by accident become affixed to the season. To maintain your sanity, keep returning to the occasion for the festivities, even if it’s been commercially and culturally forgotten. Read the Gospels, and try meditating on words of the eccentric eighteenth-century poet Christopher Smart – words set in a carol the Choir will sing in two weeks’ time:

God all-bounteous, all-creative,  
Whom no ills from good dissuade,  
Is incarnate, and a native  
Of the very world he made.<sup>2</sup>

God's Word, incarnate; God's meaning, made Flesh.

Tidings of comfort and joy!

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Smart (1722-1771), 'The Nativity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.'