

Preached by Dr Ralph Walker, Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy, on the Second Sunday after Epiphany (16 January) 2011, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God.

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.

These words, from the beginning of St John's Gospel, are very simple words. But there is something powerful and mysterious about them. What does 'the Word' mean here? It translates the Greek *logos*, which can mean 'word' in the ordinary sense, but also 'message', or 'reason', or 'rationality'; in the 6th century BC, Heraclitus, one of the earliest and most influential Greek thinkers, used it to mean the harmonious order of the universe. In a similar way, in their Greek forms the late Jewish Wisdom Books – books like *Ecclesiastes*, *Proverbs*, and *The Wisdom of Solomon* – use *logos* as the term for the divine wisdom, of which human wisdom is an imperfect reflection.

To the original readers of the Gospel the word would have carried all those resonances. But knowing that does not dissolve the mystery of those opening lines. St John is identifying Jesus, the Word made flesh, with the Divine Wisdom; but that remains puzzling. God's Wisdom is a property of God, as your height or your weight is a property of you. So something metaphorical is intended. But, as often, it is hard to spell out just what the metaphor conveys.

Logos can also mean a message. A person can at least be a messenger, and this must be part of what is meant. Jesus is God's messenger, and he has much to tell us; for instance that what matters is the spirit of the law not the letter, and the heart rather than the observance of ritual. What is most interesting is what he does not tell us. He gives us no list of theological beliefs that we must hold. Mark says he asked the disciples, "Whom say ye that I am?" and Peter answered, "Thou art the Christ". He did not go on to say, "Yes indeed, and it's very important that you recognize that I am of the same *substance* with the Father but nevertheless a different *person* from the Father", or anything like that, though many Christians have thought it overwhelmingly important to get such doctrines right.

Such theological doctrines arise not from considering Jesus' own words, but from attempting to understand how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are to be understood. For there is a sense in which Jesus is not just the messenger, but himself the message: or rather, his life and death and resurrection are the message. And it is a message profoundly difficult to decipher, though clearly we must try to make sense of it. St Paul spent much of his life trying to work it out, and so have theologians since.

The word *logos* suggests that the message must have something to do with what is rational, and the message of Jesus' life, death and resurrection must somehow connect with God's rational ordering of things. But the rationality here is divine reason, and the message to us is not one that our reason can grasp by itself. That Wisdom which is the Word of God cannot be captured in words. Words and reasoning can take us a certain amount of the way, and they are indispensable for that. That is why theological accounts are needed, but it is also why they should always be treated with caution. There is a parallel here with what we can say about the aesthetic value of a great piece of music, a fine painting, or the sort of landscape that takes

away one's breath. There is a vital element in spirituality that is closely bound up with the aesthetic.

Kant and many others have described aesthetic appreciation as a kind of grasping what cannot fully be grasped, a kind of inchoate recognition of how things fit together that cannot be put into words. Paintings, music, buildings and landscapes that have aesthetic value all have something about them that eludes description, though the words of a sensitive critic may play an indispensable part in enabling us to appreciate them. The Russian film-maker Tarkovsky, whose films are puzzling and obscure, was asked to explain what their message was, and said "If I could explain them they would no longer be art". Not all art has religious significance, of course. But much of it does, including much of the music we hear in Chapel. The message of Jesus, through his life and death and resurrection, itself resembles a work of art, in that its significance cannot be fully captured in words, however valuable the words of St Paul and other theologians may be in helping us to appreciate it.

Today we are in the season of Epiphany. The Epiphany is the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, when the Wise Men came to Bethlehem to present their offerings to the infant Jesus. However wise they were, they could not possibly have understood more than that there was something very remarkable and mysterious about this child, a king cradled in a manger. Their appreciation of that mystery is reflected in T.S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi":

There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

The Bible is full of numinous passages: that is, passages which express the awe and mystery of the presence of God, as something that cannot be fully grasped but which gives rise to endless reflection on God's nature and on our relationship to God. Our first reading was from Isaiah, a book much of which is poetry, piling metaphor on metaphor to convey the idea of a coming salvation: an idea too elusive to be reduced to a formula. Earlier in the book, the prophet describes in powerfully numinous terms a vision of the Lord, high and lifted up; and our Choir sometimes sing an anthem based on that passage, "I Saw the Lord". In today's Gospel we had another numinous moment, in the Baptist's recognition of Jesus as the Lamb of God. Such numinous writing, and such numinous experience, is not confined to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Divine inspiration must have been at work in many different religious traditions. As it says in the Qu'ran, "To every nation have I sent my messengers".

When Fr Michael asked me to preach today, he asked me to talk about the King James Version of the Bible, or, as people of my generation call it, the Authorised Version. 2011 is the four hundredth anniversary of its publication. Much has been written and broadcast about that lately; particularly impressive were the readings from the King James Version that occupied much of last Sunday on Radio 4. This translation is an astonishingly powerful work of literature, put together by a team of the most eminent translators, who did their work more thoroughly than any before them and perhaps any since, examining not only the texts in Hebrew and Greek but their ancient and modern renditions in a very large number of

languages. The King James Version was a massive work of scholarship as well as of literature. There are some who insist that this translation was directly inspired by God. And so perhaps it was. For God reveals himself in many ways, and inspires scholars as well as prophets, scientists as well as poets.

Unlike most of the recent translations, it is itself full of numinous language, language that invokes and expresses the ungraspable majesty of the Godhead, and the paradox of God's revelation of himself through his incarnation in Jesus Christ. It was written to be read in churches, and as the translators make clear it was deliberately intended to express the spiritual and numinous dimension of the original. In my view its almost complete disappearance from churches, and also from schools, is a very great misfortune. When it was taught in schools, no one had difficulty with the language of Shakespeare, or the other writers of that time when English was at its finest and most eloquent. But much more importantly, it conveyed to children a sense of the spiritual, through its powerfully effective expressions of spirituality. That has been lost.

When it was read in churches, congregations could come away impressed, even at times awed, by the power of the language. By comparison the modern translations are flat and uninspiring. It was argued by some that congregations would flock to churches if they could more readily understand every word of what was said without any need to think about it. The result has been a growing lack of interest in the Bible, and a steady decline in church attendance. It interests me that in many places the King James Version reappears on the really great occasions, as at Christmas. In those services its power to move the hearers seems to be recognized; in others it is forgotten.

There was a sad failure to distinguish two different uses of the Bible: for private study, and for use in divine service. For private study one may sometimes need to look at several different translations, to get the exact meaning of a passage. But often, even in private study, it is not *the exact meaning* of the passage that matters, for the passage may *have* no exact meaning, or none that we can render into words. And certainly when we read from the Bible in Church we are not putting forward a passage for precise analysis. What we need to hear are the resonances of the metaphors, the echoing of the diversity of meanings and associations that arise in us. Just as great poetry can only really be translated into great poetry, so it is with the numinous resonances of the Bible, so fully reflected in the King James Version, so inadequately rendered by the modern versions.

The Church has a responsibility to emphasise the spiritual and numinous side of religion. It does so in places like this Chapel, in which the music of the choir and the organ play a central part, and a powerful liturgy frames the services. But many churches do not have such resources, and seem uninterested in them. In undervaluing the spiritual, they choose to fight scepticism and atheism on their own ground. Even so, my own belief is that we can succeed against scepticism and atheism. But to go into battle leaving behind one's best weapon is foolish to say the least. It is to ignore an entire dimension of things.

But I started by talking about the Word. Let me end with it, quoting the start of the Epistle to the Hebrews. "Long ago, God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways ..." – no, that won't do.

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets:

Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.

Amen.