

## Homily for 4 February 2018

Last week the Dean of Divinity drew our attention to the subtlety and effectiveness of the beginning of St Mark's Gospel. The beginning of St John's Gospel, which we have just heard, is utterly different in character, but it is hugely powerful: one of the most powerful passages in the Bible. Mark impresses by his straightforward simplicity; John by an announcement which combines simplicity of language with an extraordinary depth of meaning, conveying complex resonances and overtones.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God". John is telling us that Jesus is the *Word* of God: "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us": he came to reveal to us something of the nature of God, indeed to present to us God himself in human form – for "the Word was with God, and the Word was God". But by using the term "Word" in this way John implies something further. In English "word" has multiple shades of meaning: the Shorter Oxford lists twelve, including "message", "command", "news", and "promise" – and all of those are intended. St John was of course writing in Greek, and "word" translates "logos": "logos" carries all these meanings and others as well. The tradition in which St John was writing was thoroughly Greek as well as thoroughly Hebrew, and two of the meanings of "logos" are particularly important here: "reason" and "orderliness". The philosopher Heraclitus, writing about 500 BC, uses "logos" to mean a rational order governing the universe. So does St John.

Reason is something that we all share. St John is telling us that God's order of things is the rational order of things: without that rational order there "was not anything made that was made". As humans, we use reason in constructing arguments and finding out new truths; we use it in all our researches and all our discoveries. It is because God's order is a rational order that we are able to win through to the truth. In thinking about how things are in the world, we constantly try to follow the requirements of *theoretical* reason. But theoretical reason is not the only kind of reason. Sometimes people think it is, but no one in antiquity would have thought that. For besides theoretical reason there is *practical* reason: and it is through practical reason that we can work out what we ought to do, find out what is right and wrong, and how we should govern our lives. Some might now say that this understanding of how to live our lives cannot be *reason*, but must be something else; but this is a mistake. It is the function of practical reason to tell us what we ought and ought not to do; theoretical reason is really an application of practical reason. It tells us what we *ought* to believe and which arguments we *ought* to accept; believing and accepting are kinds of doing. We do not *have* to accept what theoretical reason tells us to accept; often we fail to, and sometimes we regret it. In the same way we do not *have* to do what practical reason tells us to do; our failures to meet the requirements of duty and God's word are manifold and ubiquitous, and we regret them very much less than we should.

Yet in both cases there is that within us that can point us in the right way. For as St John says, the divine reason is that "true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world". The first reading, from the book of Proverbs, says much the same thing: what the Lord created at the beginning of his work was Wisdom, and Wisdom was beside him in his creation, when he "marked out the foundations of the earth", "before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made". This Wisdom, this divine reason which shaped all things, is latent in all of us, but our capacity to grasp it is often weak and our preparedness to do what it requires of us is often lacking. But what Christ's incarnation does is to make it visible to us, if we are only prepared to look. "He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not." But he was with us, and he is with us.

His earthly life presents us with a model for us to emulate, the pattern of divine reason, and above all divine *practical* reason as applied to the life of a human being. Jesus' living example of what is right, and just, and fair in life provides for us the most profound insight into the Wisdom which underlies all things. "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."