

Christmas Day at the Cathedral 2020

John 14.1-14

'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory... full of grace and truth.' John 1.14

We've learned a lot in the past nine months about what it means to be flesh, and a fair amount about grace and truth as well. To be at the mercy of a pernicious and potentially deadly virus brings us face to face with our mortality, that we fleshly creatures have but a short time to live. We flourish like a flower of the field and all too quickly are blown away by the winds of time.

We've been reminded too that we're creatures made for companionship – that we need each other – that when locked down and isolated we miss the most basic and even superficial aspects of human contact. Even our most curmudgeonly old relative, we've discovered, is dear to us – and gathering for worship, routine and habitual though it may be, in its absence leaves an unfillable gap – as does the prohibition on singing those lengthy carols that in a normal year we wish could be cut to two verses.

When we say, 'the Word became flesh' we mean that the Word, Jesus Christ, lived within and shared every aspect of this messy life and that we see his glory, not in a palace or temple, not in political authority or military might but in the person himself, born this happy morning.

We've also been reminded in these pandemic months that though human existence may be messy it's also blessed and extraordinary. We've seen that in the skills and self-sacrifice of all who staff our health-care services – from the porters and cleaners and carers and nurses to consultants and administrators. We've seen it in the guidance and inventiveness of the scientific community, not least in the cooperation across national and commercial boundaries. We've seen it in old people going on walks, children drawing rainbows, in street singalongs and basic neighbourliness. We can all give examples.

And haven't we seen it too in our willingness, most of us, to do as we've been asked, to limit our lives, to keep our distance, wash our hands, wear our masks not just to protect ourselves but others too?

When we say 'the Word became flesh' we mean that God enters too into this blessedness and is to be found in the grace and truth of our broken humanity.

As we look ahead, hopefully and yet uncertainly, to a new year when, we trust, we shall emerge from the pandemic we're required to count both the cost and the opportunities of this experience. Writing during the year, Pope Francis reminds us that 'No one is saved alone.' And he adds that we find ourselves, our true identity, by 'being open to the universal' and 'challenged by what is happening in other places', in 'enrichment by other cultures' and in our 'concern for the tragedies affecting other peoples.' Fratelli tutti #32, #146

If we're to build a future full of grace and truth we need to find ways of moving from competition to cooperation at every level of life. The health of our planet and the well-being of the poorest on the planet depend upon it. The Word becomes flesh, God comes among us, not to feed our self-conceit, not because we're invulnerable, triumphant and independent but because we're not. And if we're to live the life of the one who shared our frailty by emptying himself of privilege we must answer his call to do likewise.

Remembering that Covid has affected the poorest in our nation disproportionately – that families go hungry even in Scotland and food banks are needed more and more – that children are still deprived of equal access to educational opportunities. But remembering too that this emergency has shown us that we have the ability to do something about these things – just as we have the capacity to face up to climate change, if we have the political will to do so.

My point is that the deep down truth of Christmas is that grace and truth are to be found in a God who steps towards us in our weakness and calls us to do the same – reaching out to others.

You may know the story from the Hebrew Scriptures of Moses who was one day tending his sheep at Mount Horeb when he encountered an extraordinary sight – a bush was ablaze and though it burned fiercely it wasn't consumed by the fire. As he turned to watch this, God spoke to him, 'Moses, remove your sandals for you stand on holy ground.'

Christians have long seen the burning bush as a picture of the Incarnation – of God inhabiting our humanity, setting it ablaze with holiness yet not destroying it in the process. And we might want to extend this thought – God also setting down deep roots in the soil and thus declaring our whole planet to be holy ground on which we must tread with reverence.

I believe with all my heart that in God and through God our humanity is enlarged and enriched, as is our relationship to the world we inhabit. Enlarged, not like my new mask* that covers my humanity with a grotesque distortion – but stripping away the masks we wear to reveal ourselves as God calls us to become. In God's purposes every bush, every ordinary aspect of our lives has the capacity to shine with divine light, to burn with a holy fire that doesn't destroy but creates, doesn't mask but reveals the truth.

It should be no surprise then that Christmas directs our gaze to a fragile child born to a couple driven far from home by forces beyond their control. Herein is the Word made flesh, the glory of God made human, the grace and truth of our potential realized. It's a challenge to us, for sure, but isn't it also enough to move us to song, if only we were allowed to sing?

Yea, Lord, we greet thee, Born this happy morning;
Jesus to thee be glory given;
Word of the Father, Now in flesh appearing.
O come, let us adore him... Amen.

** On Christmas morning I always share with the congregation a present carefully chosen by my family in the hope I might be able to work it into the sermon. This year it was a facemask (appropriately so since during the pandemic we were required to wear facemasks in enclosed public spaces). Printed on it was a photograph of the lower part of my face, but slightly larger than life. The effect produced was disconcerting and to my eyes distinctly grotesque. Others, of course, may argue that the same effect is produced by my face when unmasked!*