

Sermon Helen Marshall Christmas Eve 2015

‘In the beginning was the Word’ we heard in our gospel reading earlier. ‘And the Word was with God and the Word was God.’ Words are of course used to communicate – and this reading reminds us that God wants to communicate, to communicate with us.

We live in a very wordy world and words can sometimes seem cheap. These days with mobile phones, we can even have several conversations at the same time – half talking to the person next to us, and half talking to the person at the end of the phone; not being fully present to either person. Sometimes our words can become empty phrases with little meaning, a quickly tossed out text message.

The Word of God is different. When God speaks, something happens. God’s Word is creative and life-giving. In the beginning, God said ‘let there be light’ and there was light. It may not have taken 6 days, but rather millions of years, but God created all there is through his creative word. As John puts it in his Gospel ‘All things came into being through his Word, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people’ The Word brings light and life. God didn’t need to create the universe but he wanted to communicate his life, his love, beyond himself; so he spoke the world into being.

In our own lives we all know that sometimes words are not enough. Even when we use our words carefully to express love, solidarity and gratitude. There are some situations that are beyond words and we may try to communicate then through acts of kindness, through the touch of a hand, through a hug. At the moment, as a community, we are reeling from the effects of the devastating floods in Keswick and the surrounding area, indeed across the whole of Cumbria. Some people have been flooded for the 3rd time in recent years and it's hard to capture their misery and suffering in words, or to bring solace and comfort through words. But there has been an amazing community spirit in Keswick with people giving of their time, their energy, their money, their physical effort to help their friends and neighbours in many practical ways. All this speaks louder than words.

Sometimes when we look at the suffering of our community, and of our wider world, we may wonder, even if God created the world through his Word, what does God's Word say to us now? In the face of the devastation caused by the floods, the trauma and suffering of those affected by the attacks in Paris, the enormous suffering of the people of Syria and the countless refugees fleeing their homes, what does God say?

It seems that words are not enough for God either. God doesn't only communicate through his messengers and prophets from a high and lonely distance; his word to us is not simply found in a set of guidelines in a book, or in the teachings of the church. God communicates with us in a far more radical way than that. The startling message of Christmas is that 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'

God doesn't just send a message *through* a human being but his Word *becomes* a human being. God wants to communicate with us and has found the most effective way possible to express himself. Not by sending messages of wisdom and law, but by coming himself as a human being to live amongst us. In this particular man, Jesus, we can see all the fullness of God, we can see God's nature. This is what we celebrate at Christmas.

'The Word made flesh.' For many of the ancient world, and perhaps for many today, this is a shocking message. Surely what we need is a spiritual tonic; techniques to liberate our souls from the messiness of flesh and blood. 'Flesh' can represent sickness, frailty, weakness and suffering. Yet, 'The Word became *flesh*'. The Christian message isn't that God whisks us away to a perfect, painless spiritual realm (though we may sometimes wish that) but rather that He comes into the world of flesh and blood, suffering and death.

Some of you may have seen the new 'Star Wars' film which has just come out. I saw it last night and very much enjoyed it. I well remember the first Star Wars film and have fond memories of watching all the films over the years with my children – several times! One thing that is very important in all the Star Wars films is of course 'the Force': the power which the Yedi warriors seek to use, for good or for evil. When the original films came out in the 70s and 80s some people started saying to one another 'may the Force be with you' and a number of people filling in census forms, put under the section 'religion' – Jedi. There was something attractive about the idea of the Force and the special powers the force gave to the Jedi warriors. Those of you who know your Star Wars will remember the little green alien, Yoder, who is the wisest and most senior of all the Jedi. In the film, *The Empire Strikes Back*, Yoder tells Luke Skywalker while he is training him; 'luminous beings we are – not

this crude matter.' The aim of Luke's training is to learn escape the restrictions of the body and learn supernatural powers. 'Flesh' is seen as a negative thing which we need to escape.

Many people in fact (and not only those with an interest in Star Wars) have a view of God as an impersonal force in the universe. But the Christian view of God is rather different: God is a personal being involved in the messiness of flesh and blood. Many people, including perhaps ourselves at times, find this rather difficult. Surely God can send messages, light and life, or work as a force in our world, but he cannot come among us as a person! God, the holy, majestic, glorious God cannot possibly become a human being. He is far, far beyond us. Yes, he may well send wisdom, light, laws and instructions as to how we should live...but as to him coming himself to live among us as a human being...that is beyond belief. Yet, this is what Christians believe: the Word became flesh; the Word became a human being.

The Christian gospel isn't that we need to find our way to God, but that He makes his way to us. The initiative is all God's. The holy, awesome God comes to us in a vulnerable baby, born in grimy poverty to refugee parents in the Middle East (sound strangely familiar?); he grows up to know pain and suffering; joy and friendship; betrayal and isolation; torture and death. God doesn't come as a cute little baby at Christmas time and then disappear again. The whole ministry of Jesus, his tortured death on the cross and his resurrection are all the action of God himself in our world.

Jesus comes as one of us; God with us, longing for us to respond to his love. God is not distant and uncaring, or even a detached force for good, he is in the midst of us, in the

complexities and struggles, joys and sorrows of human life. If Jesus was still on earth here in Keswick he would be there with his hands in the mud cleaning up after the flood; *this* is what God says to us; this is the God we worship. And this is the God we follow as Christians. We too are to get our hands dirty, to show kindness and practical help to those in need, open as we do so to God's grace around us and within us.

Can we be open to the 'Word made flesh living among us'? Of course, in Jesus' earthly ministry, some people responded to him and some people didn't. As John says in our reading, 'he came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.' This is the purpose of God's coming among us, of God's sending his Son into our world; that we too might know the love of the Father and live as his children.

In the beginning was the Word. God wants to communicate with us and has chosen the most intimate, effective way possible to communicate with us, as a human being; the Word made flesh. We have heard God; we have seen God as He is, in Christ. The Word has spoken; are we listening? More than that the Word has come in the flesh to live among us; will we welcome him?

