



7th February 2021
2nd Sunday before Lent

The Gathering

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Greeting

We meet in the presence of God
who knows our needs,
hears our cries,
feels our pain,
and heals our wounds.

Song: All creatures of our God and king

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUZD0hgtSgE>

Prayers of Penitence

We confess our sin, and the sins of our society,
in the misuse of God's creation.
God our Father, we are sorry
for the times when we have used your gifts carelessly,
and acted ungratefully.
Hear our prayer, and in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

We enjoy the fruits of the harvest,
but sometimes forget that you have given them to us.
Father, in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

We belong to a people who are full and satisfied,
but ignore the cry of the hungry.
Father, in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

We are thoughtless,
and do not care enough for the world you have made.
Father, in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

We store up goods for ourselves alone,
as if there were no God and no heaven.
Father, in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

The Lord enrich us with his grace,
and nourish us with his blessing;
the Lord defend us in trouble and keep us from all evil;
the Lord accept our prayers,
and absolve us from our offences,
for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Saviour.
Amen.

Collect

Almighty God,
give us reverence for all creation
and respect for every person,
that we may mirror your likeness
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

The Liturgy of the Word

Proverbs 8:1, 22-31

Does not wisdom call out?
Does not understanding raise her voice?

²² 'The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works
before his deeds of old;
²³ I was formed long ages ago,
at the very beginning, when the world came to be.
²⁴ When there were no watery depths, I was given birth,
when there were no springs overflowing with water;
²⁵ before the mountains were settled in place,
before the hills, I was given birth,
²⁶ before he made the world or its fields
or any of the dust of the earth.
²⁷ I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
²⁸ when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
²⁹ when he gave the sea its boundary
so that the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
³⁰ Then I was constantly at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
³¹ rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in the human race.
This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Psalm 104:26-end

²⁶ There the ships go to and fro,
and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.
²⁷ All creatures look to you
to give them their food at the proper time.

²⁸ When you give it to them,
they gather it up;
when you open your hand,
they are satisfied with good things.
²⁹ When you hide your face,
they are terrified;
when you take away their breath,
they die and return to the dust.
³⁰ When you send your Spirit,
they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.
³¹ May the glory of the LORD endure for ever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works –
³² he who looks at the earth, and it trembles,
who touches the mountains, and they smoke.
³³ I will sing to the LORD all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
³⁴ May my meditation be pleasing to him,
as I rejoice in the LORD.
³⁵ But may sinners vanish from the earth
and the wicked be no more.
Praise the LORD, my soul.
Praise the LORD.
This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Colossians 1:15-20

¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Song: At the name of Jesus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OI2rKRCWmOU>

Gospel Reading

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke. Glory to you, O Lord.

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

Sermon

Last week marked the end of the Christmas Season (don't despair, there are only 42 weeks until Advent). Now our thoughts turn towards preparations for Lent and the Easter season which follows. So today, very helpfully, the lectionary gives us a gospel reading that was compulsory at some point on Christmas Day. Joy.

Frustrating as this maybe, the lectionary compilers combine it with other readings which help remind us that, just like a puppy, or indeed the experience of a lot of people, Jesus is not just for Christmas. John points beyond the story of Jesus' birth and onwards towards everything Jesus was and is, and how he is central to our lives. Our readings today remind us that God in Jesus is over all, in all and through all. If you go back to the dawn of creation, or forward to the end, God is there. And we are reminded that it is through Jesus that we can begin to understand God.

The first Christians were Jewish. Yes, that quickly changed but can we just run with that as a truism for the moment? They came from a small back water in the Roman Empire which, whilst having a reputation for religious fervour and uprisings, was hardly the centre of everyone's attention. It probably appeared irrelevant, a distant outpost in a busy, loud, cosmopolitan world. And they faced a big question. How could they help people throughout the Greek and Roman shaped world engage with Christian faith? How could a faith which was initially expressed in the framework of the Jewish culture be understood by people of very different cultures? Throughout the book of Acts we see people struggling with this question. They knew what Christian faith looked like for a Jew living in Palestine, but what should it be like for a Greek intellectual in Athens? How do they explain it to a Roman citizen, heavily influenced by Greek philosophy?

We have a very similar problem. We spend a lot of time wondering how to make the story of God relevant and understandable to people in today's society. In fact, I would say we probably have it harder in that at least in the ancient world there was a wide acceptance of a religious worldview; to many folk today that is no longer the case. Today it is not just that people have little knowledge or experience of the Christian faith; they have little place in their lives for religion in general. Faith is seen by many as being irrelevant, if not ridiculous, and sometimes downright dangerous.

Our readings today relate to the struggle the early church faced: How could they convey the good news which was so bound up with Jesus' divinity and humanity? They had experienced Jesus as both divine and human. They could talk of him as the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. How could they explain that a divine being became human? How could they help people understand?

John resolves this problem by use of the word *logos*. It is a topic which has dominated much Johannine scholarship down the years. Three strands of thought coalesce around this term.

Firstly, *logos* is the Greek word for word. Philosophers used that word 'logos' in a special way to refer to a kind of ordering principle of the universe. Sometimes they used 'nature' and 'logos' interchangeably. What they meant was that there was something behind all of nature – giving it a purpose and meaning; the driving force, the principle by which life held together. And as Greek philosophers talked of the 'logos' they almost gave it a personality.

The second strand is the Old Testament idea of the 'word of the Lord'. This is used in two ways. Firstly in Genesis where it represents the creative power of God; God spoke and something happened. God only needed to say a few words and a whole world and universe came into being. Words for God were not just things to say, concepts to express or write down. Words were effective, they achieved something. God's Word was God at work in the world. It is also used as God's agent in the world, with its own intentions and actions, such as in Isaiah 55.10-11: *¹⁰As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

The third strand is the wisdom tradition which we find in both the Old Testament and in the texts of the Second Temple, which we know as the apocrypha. Today's reading from Proverbs is an example. Wisdom is spoken of as a personality, a person, who existed before the worlds were created. Wisdom at God's side as he created. Wisdom as the craftsman moulding creation and delighting in what was made. Now there is a slippery slope here. Firstly in the gendered language used, which we shall think about another day, and secondly about the type of language Proverbs 8 is. Proverbs 8 is widely classed as being poetic, in this case it is an encomium – a poem of praise. That affects the way we read and use the language. Solomon uses personification to describe an attribute of God not a person within the Godhead, a concept which would have been alien to him.

John brings these three strands together in one word as a way of explaining to Greek and Roman and Jewish people who Jesus was – and the first verses of John's Gospel were born. John gives the 'Word', the 'Logos', a central place. He describes the 'Logos' as God, the Creative Word, who took on flesh as the man Jesus Christ. ... 'God active in the created world' = 'Logos'. ... God's Word expressed as a human being. The agent by which God's activity and glory is revealed by word and deed.

It might sound strange to us, but John was trying to translate the concept of the incarnation into a form that Greek and Roman and Jew might understand. And it is never going to be perfect because we are trying to use human language, with all its limitations, to describe God.

That imagery is not necessarily helpful today. If someone with no connection to the Christian faith, or indeed the world of faith in general, came and asked me who Jesus was and I replied:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it....",

my questioner might well ask how many magic mushrooms I had been munching because the imagery in use, no matter how majestic it might be, does not resonate with the world today.

Our challenge is to find ways of expressing what we believe in terms and in ways that people in today's world will understand. We cannot say that it worked in the past so it will work again. We cannot just do the things the way we have always done. We cannot continue to use only the words

that we understand, or think we understand. We cannot continue to be just the church we have always been. Words and customs move on. Meanings change, hopes and fears change. The world is shrinking and ideas from the four corners of the world now influence the values of every society.

For some that is threatening, and I am sorry if you find it so. For others it is exhilarating. And be clear no one is proposing we rip up the prologue, or overture as I prefer to think of it, (an overture introduces themes which are then picked up later in the work) to John's Gospel simply because the language that is used no longer resonates with the world we now live in. Nor is one suggesting that the fundamental teachings and doctrines of the church should be changed simply because they no longer resonate with the zeitgeist.

As we participate in a process of change we do just what Jesus did The Word, Jesus, became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. God changed, God became human, God learnt new things, expressed himself in different ways, felt tired for the first time, experienced limitations for the first time. God changed so as to bring his love to his creation. The early church changed its rules, expressed itself in new and different ways, so that its mission to the Roman world might be effective. And we are called to do the same, to look for new ways to communicate the Gospel to those who live around us but who have no religious background to speak of whatsoever.

Shalom,

Ian

Affirmation of Faith

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession

O God our creator,
whose good earth is entrusted to our care
and delight and tenderness,
we pray:
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

For all who are in captivity to debt,
whose lives are cramped by fear
from which there is no turning
except through abundant harvest.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

For all who depend on the earth for their
daily food and fuel,
whose forests are destroyed
for the profits of a few.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

For all who labour in poverty,
who are oppressed by unjust laws,
who are banned for speaking the truth,
who long for a harvest of justice.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

For all who are in captivity
to greed and waste and boredom,
whose harvest joy is choked
with things they do not need.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

Turn us again from our captivity
and restore our vision,
that our mouth may be filled with laughter
and our tongue with singing.
Amen.

The Peace

Christ is our peace.
If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.
The old has passed away: behold, everything has become new.

May the peace of the Lord be always with us and all those we love.

Song: All the heavens

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJIEbtYuynM>

An act of Spiritual Communion

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day.
Amen.

Lord, in these days of mercy,
make us quiet and prayerful;
in these days of challenge,
make us stronger in you;
in these days of emptiness,
take possession of us;
in these days of waiting,
open our hearts to the mystery of your cross.

Song: Raise a hallelujah

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2XtRuPfaAU>

May God, who in Christ gives us a spring of water
welling up to eternal life,
perfect in you the image of his glory;
and the blessing of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.

Amen.

The Dismissal

To God the Father, who loved us,
and made us accepted in the Beloved:
to God the Son, who loved us,
and loosed us from our sins by his own blood:
to God the Holy Spirit,
who spreads the love of God abroad in our hearts:
to the one true God be all love and all glory
for time and for eternity.

Amen.