

Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> January

Ephesians 1:3-14

John 1:1-18

The beautiful prologue to John's gospel – the passage that we had read this morning as our gospel reading, and that we often have on Christmas Morning or at the midnight service – contains a couple of wonderful images.

The word becomes flesh – no longer is faith about obeying sets of written rules, it's about following a living breathing human being who embodies all that there is about God.

The light shines in the darkness – this living, loving human being is like a light in a dark world – shining out, making things clear, guiding and inspiring, warming and warning.

And so briefly this morning I want to think about those 2 phrases:  
The word becomes flesh and the light shines in the darkness

I was given a book for Christmas called *The Salt Path*. It's the story of a couple in their 50s who lose their home as a result of a court case at the same time as the husband is diagnosed with a progressive terminal illness. Rather than wallow in self pity and despair they, somewhat randomly, decide to pack a few belongings including a lightweight tent and a couple of sleeping bags that were a tad too lightweight into rucksacks and set off walking the 630 mile long South West Coast Path around Somerset, Devon and Cornwall.

The book paints some lovely pictures of glorious scenery and stunning views; it describes graphically the pain and the joy of walking day after day in all kinds of weather with little money, basic food and no fixed abode. It talks of the people they meet – those that help them and encourage them and those that ignore them. And, although the words used are well crafted and well-chosen, I know that the views would be better if I could see them for myself – if I could smell the sea and hear the gulls; the feelings of heat, wetness, tiredness and hunger would be more real if I experienced them for myself (not that I particularly want to); and the couple themselves and the people they met would only come to life and be whole people if I met them in person. Words can only go so far.

We can read as much as we like about God. We could read the whole Bible cover to cover. By doing so we might well get to know a lot about God. But we will only get to really know God when we encounter him in the flesh as it were – in the person of Jesus.

The gospel reading finishes with the phrase *No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.*

These words remind me of the special words that are in the Christmas season communion prayer we are using in St James at the moment *In him we see our God made visible and so are caught up in the love of the God we cannot see.*

Words that declare that if we look at the son – Jesus himself – we see God. They are words that Jesus himself used when he answered Philip's demand to 'show us the Father' with the statement *Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*

Throughout history people have sought after God. The uniqueness of the Christian faith is that it does not simply tell us about God, it allows us to meet and encounter this God for ourselves. And it does this through the person of Jesus who is God himself in human form. This is the true message of Christmas that transcends the rituals of trees and tinsel and turkey and gifts. This is what we celebrate.

And we celebrate because it shows us two things. First what God is like. Loving, caring, always with time for people, interested in who people are, wanting the best for people, encouraging not condemning. The list can go on – we read the gospel accounts of Jesus and learn who God really is, what his character is like.

But it also shows us the true human potential. At the beginning of the Bible we read that God created human beings in his image. Somewhere along the way – the Bible gives the story of Adam and Eve as an illustration of people turning away from God – somewhere along the way that image has been tarnished to such an extent that it's hard to see God in humanity. But in the person of Jesus – God in human form, the true image of God – we can see something of what humans were created to be. The characteristics of Jesus – the godly characteristics we have just thought about – are precisely those that humans were created to show.

Jesus talks about himself being The Light of the World. He means that he is the one who shows things for what they should be – who shines a light and allows us to see clearly perhaps for the first time. He shows us God and he shows us what humans could be like. He shows us how to live and he shows us how to love. He shows us the way back to God and he shows us the way we should care for each other. And he asks us to shine as lights in the world. To take his light and shine with it in the world by the way we live and treat people. To become his followers, his disciples, his apprentices as we have been thinking about recently and to shine with his light in the world.

And this brings us to that second phrase in that prologue.

The light shines in the darkness

Many of us would say that 2020 was a dark year. The shadow of Covid 19 has hung over us for most of the year. Perhaps for some of us the shadow has been darker than for others. Maybe we have lost loved ones, and perhaps not been able to be with them before they died. Certainly none of us have been able to spend the time we would want with those we love. Plans for outings, holidays, Christmas have all had to be abandoned or radically changed.

Globally we have seen nations battle with the virus; we have seen wars continuing, refugees carrying on their attempts to begin new lives. We have seen vulnerable people being exploited, the poor getting poorer and the rich getting richer.

The world is still a dark dark place.

At the Widney Christingle service this year I told the story of when I was on a tour of a cave system. We followed the guide into a large cavern. He asked us to turn out our torch lights, then he turned off the electric lights. It was total blackness. You couldn't see anything. You couldn't see even your hand right in front of your face. He then lit a candle. A single candle. The faint light spread slowly around the cavern as the flame took hold. It wasn't bright but we could see. It only takes a tiny flickering light to dispel the darkness. The light shines in the darkness.

As we have just heard, Jesus asks us to shine as his lights in this dark world, and we can see how this has worked in our churches and communities during the pandemic. Through small acts of love and care – phone calls made,

shopping done, prayers offered, gifts given. Not just because we are nice people but because we are seeking to live as God wants, to shine as lights, to follow the example of Jesus and be inspired by him.

The encouragement to me here is that darkness is only the absence of light. Once a light shines – however dimly – darkness is no more.

So two thoughts from the John prologue. First that Jesus shows us not only what God is like, but also what we can be like if we choose to follow him. And second that because we follow him we can be the lights that shine in the darkness.

As we stand on the threshold of a new year these are good thoughts to take with us. Thoughts about getting to know God better through Jesus and about living lives that shine out more brightly because we follow him more closely. May this new year be brighter and better than the one just passed.