

St Mary's Church – Christmas 2 – 2i22

A very happy and less stressful new year to us all.

A good insight into the four Evangelists and their purpose in writing their gospels can be gained by looking at how they begin. Matthew seeks to show how Jesus is the fulfilment of prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures—how often he remarks “all this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet” or something similar—so he begins with a genealogy showing how Jesus is descended from Abraham at the start of Jewish history.

Mark begins in his characteristically breathless way: one of his favourite words is ‘immediately’. After a brief title, The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, he is straight into the ministry of Jesus, beginning with John and his baptism of Jesus.

Luke, after a Greek literary acknowledgement of his patron, Theophilus. And his statement of intent to produce a Gospel that is evidence based, begins with the Christmas story, the start of Jesus's life.

The beginning of the Jewish people, the start of Jesus's ministry, the start of Jesus's life: three ways to begin.

And then comes John.

This morning's gospel reading didn't include the start of John's Gospel, though we heard it on Christmas morning and know it well.

John begins his Gospel not in the recent past like Mark and Luke, nor in historical times like Matthew, or even, as in Genesis, at the creation of the world, but, with a nod to Genesis, he begins with God before time even began. “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God.” John's Gospel is not really the short biography of the other three evangelists; it is clearly a work of theology, told through the life of Jesus but with a clear theological focus on who Jesus was, as John has come to realise after many years of prayerful thought.

And it's all there in his opening prologue. It is, of course, one of the most sublimely poetical passages in the whole of the Bible. And it achieves in the simplest of languages. In the magnificent translation of the King James version, it is written almost entirely in monosyllables. Even in the Greek, which is a language that uses more multisyllables than does English, it is still made up of short words. And that is part of its genius.

But it is also a clear introduction to the story that John will tell, and an introduction to the words that John will repeat over and over again in his Gospel: ‘Love’, ‘light, truth’, ‘glory’.

It wouldn't be true to say that if you just read the prologue you don't need the rest of the book, but its not very far from the truth.

John explains the nature of Jesus, the Logos, with God from before all things began. It's not yet Trinitarian language, but it is edging very much in that direction, more than 300 years before the Church expressed the doctrine of the Trinity fully at various ecumenical Councils, incidentally, causing one the first major splits in the Church. But Jesus is also man, “The word became flesh and lived among us,” perhaps translated more accurately, pitched his tent among us. He became flesh, incarnate, a man like us, here for a limited time as we are, but God for all time and beyond.

He is the fulfilment of all that God intended for his chosen people, the Jews, and to this the prophets, possibly unknowingly, bore witness. And here John the Baptist stands for them, as the last and greatest of the prophets, sent from God, and bearing witness to the light. The last three verses, not usually read on Christmas day, so what they say can be overlooked. “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” The interesting thing is the absence of ‘but’. Jesus hasn't come to replace the Law. That was God's plan for the Jews, enabling them to survive as his chosen people, as, of course, it still does. The law remains; Jesus is taking the next step, the grace and truth that is his gift.

As I say, in the prologue it's all there.

“Okay, fine,” you may say. “But isn’t this rather too austere, when it is, after all it’s still Christmas? What’s happened to baby Jesus, shepherds, wise men, ox and ass, and carolling angels? Do we have to dump all that?”

Of course not. Jesus became a human being, and, as one, will have celebrated and shared stories and songs with his family and those he loved. As a family they too will have had their traditions and festivals and the joy and love that they bring. Move over, puritans, we don’t want what you stood for. But behind all the Christmas fun and celebration there is what John reminds us of, in the words of the old carol, the truth sent from above.

I think John Betjeman got it right:

And is it true? And is it true,
This most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,
A Baby in an ox's stall?
The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a Child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is,
No loving fingers tying strings
Around those tissue'd fripperies,
The sweet and silly Christmas things,
Bath salts and inexpensive scent
And hideous tie so kindly meant,

No love that in a family dwells,
No carolling in frosty air,
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
Can with this single Truth compare—
That God was Man in Palestine
And lives to-day in Bread and Wine.