

Archbishop of Canterbury's Christmas sermon - 'Don't build lives on selfishness and fear'

When the first Christians read – or more probably heard – the opening words of John's gospel, they would have understood straight away quite a lot more than we do. They would have remembered, many of them, that in Hebrew 'word' and 'thing' are the same, and they would all have known that in Greek the word used has a huge range of meaning – at the simplest level, just something said; but also a pattern, a rationale, as we might say, even the entire structure of the universe seen as something that makes sense to us, the structure that holds things together and makes it possible for us to think.

Against this background, we can get a glimpse of just what is being said about Jesus. His life is what God says and what God does; it is the life in which things hold together; it is because of the life that lives in him that we can think. Jesus is the place where all reality is focused, brought to a point. *Here* is where we can see as nowhere else what connects all reality – all human experience and all natural laws. Edward Elgar famously said about his *Enigma Variations* that they were all based on a tune that everyone knew – and no-one has ever worked out what he meant. But John's gospel declares that the almost infinite variety of the life we encounter is all variations on the theme that is stated in one single clear musical line, one melody, in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. 'In him was life, and the life was the light of men.'

But this shouldn't make us forget entirely the underlying image. The life that lives in Jesus, the everlasting divine agency that is uniquely embodied in him, is like something that is said – a *word* addressed to us. Because, like any word addressed to us, it demands a response. And the gospel goes on at once to tell us that the expected response was not forthcoming. Before we have even got to Christmas in the words of the gospel we are taken to Good Friday, and to the painful truth that the coming of Jesus splits the world into those who respond and those who don't. Once the word is spoken in the world, there is no way back. Your response to it, says the gospel again and again, is what shows who and what you really are, what is deepest in you, what means most. What we say or do in our response to Jesus is our way of discovering for ourselves and showing to one another what is real in and for us. Like the other gospel writers, John hints very strongly that some people respond deeply and truthfully to Jesus without fully knowing who he is or what exactly they are doing in responding to him; this is not a recipe for tight religious exclusivism. But the truth is still an uncompromising one: if you cannot or will not respond, you are walking away from reality into a realm of trackless fogbound falsehood.

There is the question we cannot ignore. It's been well said that the first question we hear in the Bible is not humanity's question to God but God's question to us, God walking in the cool of the evening in the Garden of Eden, looking for Adam and Eve who are trying to hide from him. 'Adam, where are you?' The life of Jesus is that question translated into an actual human life, into the conversations and encounters of a flesh and blood human being like all others – except that when people meet him they will say, like the woman who talks with him at the well of Samaria, 'Here is a man who told me everything I ever did.' Very near the heart of Christian faith and practice is this encounter with God's questions, 'who are you, where are you?' Are you on the side of the life that lives in Jesus, the life of grace and truth, of unstinting generosity and unsparing honesty, the only life that *gives* life to others? Or are you on your own side, on the side of disconnection, rivalry, the hoarding of gifts, the obsession with control? To answer that you're on the side of life doesn't mean for a moment that you can now relax into a fuzzy philosophy of 'life-affirming' comfort. On the contrary: it means you are willing to face everything within you that is cheap, fearful, untruthful and evasive, and let the light shine on it. Like Peter in the very last chapter of John's gospel, we can only say that we are trying to love the truth that is in Jesus, even as we acknowledge all we have done that is contrary to his spirit. And we say this because we trust that we *are* loved by this unfathomable mystery who comes to us in the shape of a newborn child, 'full of grace and truth'.

Finding words to respond to the Word made flesh is and has always been one of the most demanding things human beings can do. Don't believe for a moment that religious language is easier or vaguer than the rest of our language. It's more like the exact opposite: think of St John writing his gospel, crafting the slow, sometimes repetitive pace of a narrative that allows Jesus to change the perspective inch by inch as a conversation unfolds. Or of St Paul, losing his way in his sentences, floundering in metaphors as he struggles to find the words for something so new that there are no precedents for talking about it. Or any number of the great poets and contemplatives of the Christian centuries. It isn't surprising if we need other people's words a lot of the time; and it's of

great importance that we have words to hand that have been used by others in lives that obviously have depth and integrity. That's where the language of our shared worship becomes so important.

This coming year we celebrate the 350th anniversary of the Book of Common Prayer. It has shaped the minds and hearts of millions; and it has done so partly because it has never been a book for individuals alone. It is *common* prayer, prayer that is shared. In its origins, it was meant to be – and we may well be startled by the ambition of this – a book that defined what a whole society said to God together. If the question 'where are you?' or 'who are you?' were being asked, not only individual citizens of Britain but the whole social order could have replied, 'Here we are, speaking together – to recognize our failures and our ideals, to recognize that the story of the Bible is our story, to ask together for strength to live and act together in faithfulness, fairness, pity and generosity.' If you thumb through the Prayer Book, you may be surprised at how much there is that takes for granted a very clear picture of how we behave with each other. Yes, of course, much of this language feels dated – we don't live in the unselfconscious world of social hierarchy that we meet here. But before we draw the easy and cynical conclusion that the Prayer Book is about social control by the ruling classes, we need to ponder the uncompromising way in which those same ruling classes are reminded of what their power is for, from the monarch downwards. And the almost forgotten words of the Long Exhortation in the Communion Service, telling people what questions they should ask themselves before coming to the Sacrament, show a keen critical awareness of the new economic order that, in the mid sixteenth century, was piling up assets of land and property in the hands of a smaller and smaller elite.

The Prayer Book is a treasury of words and phrases that are still for countless English-speaking people the nearest you can come to an adequate language for the mysteries of faith. It gives us words that say where and who we are before God: 'we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep', 'we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table', but also, 'we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs through hope of the everlasting kingdom'. It gives us words for God that hold on to the paradoxes we can't avoid: 'God... who art always more ready to hear than we to pray,' 'who declarest thy almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity, 'whose property is always to have mercy.' A treasury of words for God – but also a source of vision for an entire society: 'Give us grace seriously to lay heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions'; 'If ye shall perceive your offences to be such as are not only against God but also against your neighbours; then ye shall reconcile yourselves unto them; being ready to make restitution'

The world has changed, the very rhythms of our speech have changed, our society is irreversibly more plural, and we have – with varying degrees of reluctance – found other and usually less resonant ways of talking to God and identifying who we are in his presence. If we used only the Prayer Book these days we'd risk confusing the strangeness of the mysteries of faith with the strangeness of antique and lovely language. But we're much the poorer for forgetting it and pushing it to the margins as much as we often do in the Church. And it is crucial to remember the point about the Prayer Book as something for a whole society, binding together our obligations to God and to one another, in a dense interweaving of love and duty joyfully performed.

The Prayer Book was once the way our society found words to respond to the Word, to say who and where they were in answer to God's question. Those who prayed the Prayer Book, remember, included those who abolished the slave trade and put an end to child labour, because of what they had learned in this book and in their Bibles about the honour of God and of God's children. They knew their story; they knew how to give an answer for themselves, how to join up the muddle of their experience in a coherent pattern by relating it to the unchanging truth and grace of God. That's why the coming year's celebration is not about a museum piece.

The most pressing question we now face, we might well say, is who and where we are as a society. Bonds have been broken, trust abused and lost. Whether it is an urban rioter mindlessly burning down a small shop that serves his community, or a speculator turning his back on the question of who bears the ultimate cost for his acquisitive adventures in the virtual reality of today's financial world, the picture is of atoms spinning apart in the dark.

And into that dark the Word of God has entered, in love and judgment, and has not been overcome; in the darkness the question sounds as clear as ever, to each of us and to our church and our society: 'Britain, where are you?' Where are the words we can use to answer?