



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter - December 2008

The Word of God dwelling among us

WHEN YOU HEAR the phrase 'the Word of God', what do you think of? The chances are that you think of the Bible – perhaps the book itself or perhaps the passage that you have just heard read. After readings at Mass the reader says 'This is the Word of the Lord' and it's easy enough to think of print on the page, phrases in the air.

The Christmas Gospel (John 1) gives us a much fuller description. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. More exciting still, a few verses later we hear 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. Before the end of the first chapter of St John's Gospel we find out that the Word of God is 'the only-begotten Son' (verse 18) and that the name of the Son of God (verse 34) is Jesus (verse 29). So the Word is a person not just a book, not just a bible passage, not just an idea.

It is this that sets our Faith apart from that of others. Jews and Muslims are 'People of the Book'. We share a great deal with them. But we Christians are also 'Jesus People', 'People of the Word of God', Jesus himself. When we come to Mass we don't just hear about the Word and study the Word. We meet him and receive him into our souls and bodies. That is the Christmas Gift: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16).

From this it follows that the Word is all-powerful. It – or rather 'he' – makes things happen. The Word of God brings about that which it proclaims. So, when we hear the Gospel, Christ himself is speaking to us. When we tell others the Good News of God's Love in Christ, it is Christ himself who is telling them. When the priest speaks the Word of God over the bread and wine, it becomes the Word himself. When we receive Holy Communion, he comes and dwells in us.

The Word of God is not confined to church. Faithful Christian disciples are nourished by daily prayer and bible reading. In the words there is an encounter with the Word. Christians praying and working for the coming of God's Kingdom are servants of the Word. The Word speaks through good teachers, wise doctors, the care of a nurse, the help of a counsellor, the skill of a social worker, the fairness of a trader, the talent of a craftsman, the playing of a musician, a hard day's work honestly done.

But if we want people truly to encounter the miracle of Christmas, the miracle of God in our midst, we need to believe in it ourselves – look at John 3:16 again – and explore it to the best of our ability. Once a fortnight at church won't do. Receiving and not giving won't do. Most of all we need to tell others! Some work is being done on new phrases for the end of Mass. One is going to come out rather like this: 'Go in peace and announce the Gospel'. Perhaps it should say 'Go and spread the word about the Word'!

May God bless us as we experience once more the joy of the Word in our midst.

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