

God's Poetry

Epistle: Colossians 1:15-20

Gospel: John 1:1-14

2nd before Lent

In a recent article in the Church Times (15/01/21), Canon Mark Oakley reflected, "I believe that, when we walk into any place of worship, we walk into a poem". Today's readings are two of the most beautiful poems in scripture. The first is generally thought to be a liturgical hymn quoted by Paul in his letter to the Colossians. Jesus is not mentioned by name, but it's all about him, the Son, the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, who came to us as one of us - not as hologram or a zoom call from heaven, but face to face.

Standing alongside this passage is the opening chapter of John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word". The Greek term for Word, *Logos*, also means Reason, in this case God's reason, God's wisdom, God's power. John associated the *Logos* with Jesus, who was with God from the beginning, when the *Logos* brought forth the cosmos.

This leads to another beautiful poem - the first chapter of Genesis, when God spoke and creation began. "Let there be light"; and there was light" (Genesis 1.3). There followed day, night, sky, earth, seas, plants, fish, birds, wild animals and creeping things, all formed through the power of God's word.

Then God spoke the most dangerous word: "*humankind*". Not only that, he followed it up with words like *image* and *dominion*. With his breath, he poured part of his divinity into the dust of which we are made. And then, in an act of shocking generosity, he gave us the power of the Word.

It wasn't long before we were abusing the word. "The serpent tricked me"; "Am I my brother's keeper"? And so God banished Adam and Eve from the garden and sent Cain east of Eden. But he continued to engage with us, carrying on long conversations with Abraham and speaking directly to Moses. However, for the most part, the Old Testament is a story of the gradual fading of direct contact between humanity and God. Prophets, who experienced God only through visions and dreams, took over the job of relaying his message to the masses, and following Isaiah, the Word seems to have largely retired. For 700 years humans had only his remembered acts and words to guide them in their relationships with each other and with God.

Then God did another new and shocking thing: The Word became flesh, and lived among us. Once again, God was speaking to his people and performing miracles. John makes no bones about the scandal of our response to this completely one sided gift: "... the world did not know him. He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him". Given the circumstances I

doubt that we today would have done any better, because in Jesus, the Word didn't come as a shout, and in him God spoke in a completely new way. Conversations tended to be short and were often addressed to individuals or small groups: "Peace be with you", "your sins are forgiven", "stand up and walk". Many of his sayings were cryptic and perplexing: "Blessed are the meek", "Love your enemies", "Take up your cross".

When people sought answers, Jesus' response was often a question: "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath"? (Matt. 12:12); "Is not life more than food, or the body more than clothing"? (Matt. 6:25); "Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit"? (Luke 6:39). Even Pilate couldn't get a straight answer to his simple question: "Are you the King of the Jews"? "You say so", answered Jesus.

He was a brilliant storyteller, and his surprise endings often left his listeners shaking their heads. Did the elder brother join the party for the prodigal who had squandered half of the family's wealth? Was it really fair to cast the underdressed wedding guest into outer darkness? His refusal to supply morals usually produced silence as people searched within themselves for answers, and his restraint gave them freedom with which they might or might not seek God. The choice was theirs, as it remains ours.

And then, one day on Golgotha, the Word gave a loud cry, and fell silent. The earth shook, rocks split and the curtain of the temple was ripped from top to bottom as humanity stood speechless at the foot of the cross. Finally a few terrified souls managed to whisper, "Truly this was the Son of God".

There followed a day of complete quiet, and then the Word rose to break the silence. That well loved voice was heard again: "Go ... make disciples of all nations". And with that he disappeared.

But God's Word did not disappear. It hung, resonating in the air, full of power and purpose. And soon it was travelling throughout the world healing, challenging, transforming; speaking through friends, strangers, and adversaries; in times of joy and tragedy; making its presence known in fresh breezes, spring rain and skies full of stars; through birth, life and death; in dreams, in music and poetry.

God comes to us in all the humdrum, helter-skelter events of each day, carrying messages which may make all the difference to our lives; but I would guess that many of us have a lot of trouble listening to God. We generally prefer to speak. We punctuate our prayers with phrases such as "Hear us Lord", as if the job of listening were all God's and not ours. We list our concerns and make suggestions as to how God might solve them. How much better it might be if we turned the process around and asked God what we might do about things saying

"Speak Lord, for your servant is listening"?

If you are straining to hear God's voice today, remember that the Word doesn't come as a shout. More often it comes as a whisper, and we hear it best in the silence, away from the noise and activity that so often take over our lives today. We are called by the psalmist to "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46). If we can only heed that call and take the time to put aside our own chattering thoughts, to create a sacred silence, then we may, through that silence manage to hear a little of God's poetry breaking through:

Do not be afraid ... love one another ... let your light shine ... Feed my lambs.

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Amen

Martha Taft Golden
Benefice service during
Coronavirus lockdown