

## **Address from Bill Pattinson for the Second Sunday before Lent**

**February 7th 2021 “...and the Word became flesh.”**

**Readings: Proverbs 8:1, 22-31. John 1:1-14**

The two Sundays before Lent have special themes. Today's theme is “Creation” and next week's, when Howard will be preaching, it is “transfiguration.”

Perhaps, considering a theme of creation is why the wonderfully poetic opening verses of John's Gospel are chosen for today, verses we are more likely to recall at the end of a Christmas carol service or as the Gospel on Christmas Day itself. Or perhaps it is because the opening phrase “In the beginning..” is the same as the very start of Genesis and the story of God's creation of the world. Or perhaps it is preparing us for Lent, a time when we look carefully at our own journeys of faith and where we are with our relationship with Jesus, whose story is so fully introduced to us in this prologue to John's Gospel.

In the beginning, at the start of Lockdown 1, when the sun was shining, the birds were singing, gardens were budding and a strange silence fell on our streets, we perhaps thought this change in our life pattern brought unexpected benefits. Soon, we hoped, we shall return to normal or “new normal” living. This, we now know, was not to be. Our fears, anxieties, losses and sheer horror grew as Lockdown 2, quickly followed by 3 saw hospitals overcrowded and short-staffed and the death toll from the virus grow to over 100,000 by January of this year. Within this wider story of the pandemic, we all have our own stories to tell. We became worried, anxious and confused by the illness and death of so many from Covid-19, by the immense pressure on the NHS, by the closing of shops and businesses leading to redundancies, by the closing also of schools leading to home schooling and examination chaos, by the stress of an isolated life style where the visits of loving family and friends were denied and the missings...so many missings! In February's “New Leaves” magazine my poem for the month was Stewart Henderson's “Breakages”. He writes:

“We will be broken by many things;  
We will be broken by events and loss;  
the diagnosis and gaunt treatments,  
the riots of grief and the frozen days that follow.”

So in such a fragmented, fractured world, where is our faith? This does not, at first glance, appear to be fertile ground for developing our relationship with God? How

can He allow such heartache, confusion and grief? “Grow your faith” is the wording on the front cover of our magazine. How can our faith grow in such desperate times?

In the letter to the Hebrews we read”

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1).

What are the things we can hope for? Especially when it is so much easier to be convinced by things seen, rather than unseen. The author of John’s Gospel, in these opening 14 verses, points directly to the Word, that is Jesus, for such hope. Look long and hard at Jesus if you want to know God. Nobody has seen God, who has made himself known through Jesus, whom we have seen.

The opening words of books are so important. Good openings encourage you to read on, because they give a strong flavour of what you are to taste in the book. Jane Austen’s novels are renown for their wonderful starts:

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”

The start of “Pride and Prejudice.” You already have a good idea of what the story will be about. However one of my favourite starts, which both grips your imagination and predicts events, is Graham Greene’s “Brighton Rock.”

“Hale knew, before he had been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him.”

The beginning of John’s Gospel is just as arresting.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

This book is clearly about the Word and we don’t have to read much further to understand that the Word is Jesus, who “became flesh and dwelt among us”. God in Jesus is over all. John wants to make sure that his readers appreciate the full meaning of who Jesus was, and is, and shall be and what he has accomplished and done for us. The Word, Jesus, was there at the beginning of God’s creation. This links with the Jewish principle of Wisdom, whom we heard in our first reading from Proverbs that

“The Lord created at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.” God, Word, Wisdom - Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who in the beginning brought light into the world. Now at the beginning of John’s Gospel, God is saying again “Let there be light.” A re-creation, a new world which becomes tangible in the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God loves us as we are, completely, unconditionally. When we look at the breath-taking beauty of creation, it points not just to God the creator, but also because of the Word to Jesus who was instrumental in creation also. Malcolm Guite in his poem simply called “John” sums this all up:

This is the Gospel of the primal light,  
The first beginning and the fruitful end.”

Nor is this second light, this new creation, this Jesus, set free from the suffering and darkness which we, in these present times, so surely experience. “He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him.” Jesus knows our worries and fears, because he has experienced them himself. It is in times like these where God is so clearly to be seen in his acts of love and compassion and we have seen plenty of that during this pandemic. So in Jesus there is great hope and John, in this wonderful prologue, invites us to find out all about him. If you want your faith to grow then in the next few weeks of Lockdown 3, read John’s Gospel.

And Nigel and his ministerial team invite us to another way of growing in faith, of challenging our relationship with God, by joining a Lent group this month, where we are following the Diocesan course, “These are our Stories”.

This five week Lent course is based on the pandemic stories of five people from across Devon and will encourage each of us to tell our own stories and reflect on where our faith fits into the experience of the past 12 months.

So here’s my sermon summary. Three questions to ask. “Where is Jesus in my life now? Where can I see hope? How can my faith grow?”

Three things to do: Find an opportunity to tell your pandemic story. (You can always send a copy to me which I can put in the magazine.) Read John’s Gospel. Join a Lent group.

“Let us light a candle in the darkness  
in the face of death, a sign of life

as a sign of hope where all seemed hopeless  
as a sign of peace in place of strife.”