

## Advent Sunday 2008 – The Word Made Flesh

*God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.*

I wish I could go on. These are, of course, the opening words of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the traditional reading for Christmas Day. Advent is effectively a preparation for Christmas but more accurately a preparation for the Coming of Christ – that great consummation of the cosmos in which everything finds its purpose and we human beings come into our eternal inheritance.

In contrast to the Bible, we tend to underrate the power of words. We talk about *mere words*. We argue that actions speak louder than words. We claim that, *while sticks and stones may break my bones, words can never hurt me*. We do know better, however. We do really agree with Baron Lytton: *The pen is mightier than the sword*.

In the Bible, the Ten Commandments are called the ten words. It is the Word of God which teaches us how to live. The Word of God is a word of blessing. The Word of God is a word of warning to those who refuse to receive it. What is the Word of God but love? The Law of Moses is summarised in the twin commandments to love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind and to love your neighbour as yourself. To be filled with the love of God is to have eternal life, to experience joy in all its fullness. To be empty of love, to reject love? Well, *the wages of sin is death: but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord*. The Word of God invites us to choose life.

What we call the Old Testament the New Testament calls the Law and the Prophets. The Law, we have seen, is headed by the Ten Words, the Ten Commandments, and summed up in the command to love. What about the prophets? Prophets are people who proclaim the Word of God. They are God's messengers. Characteristically, a prophet begins speaking with the formula *Thus saith the LORD*. The prophet's task is to discern and to declare God's Word. We look for prophets today so that we may hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches in our present crises and opportunities.

Emphatically, however, the prophet's message is not *mere words*. It is the Word of God and it accomplishes the Will of God. God says in the Book of Isaiah: *For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereunto I sent it*. Good News? He goes on immediately to say to His people, *For ye shall go out with joy*. Surely that means us, not just the original hearers of the prophecies in the Book of Isaiah hundreds of years before the Incarnation of Jesus, the Word made flesh, but to every generation of people with hearts open to receive the engrafted Word of God.

When the Epistle to the Hebrews says: *the word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two edged sword* it is firmly in the biblical mainstream. Psalm 33 celebrates because, it says, *By the word of the LORD were the heavens made: and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth.* It is God's Word which creates, redeems and sanctifies everything that exists and, most especially, us human beings.

And Jesus is the Word made flesh. So prepare to celebrate His coming at Christmas. Be ready to meet Him at your death and at the final consummation. Prepare to meet Him in daily life in the faces of other people, in the wonders of nature, in prayer and in the services of the Church. Jesus is the Word of Life. Decide for Him if you have not done so already. Be always ready to receive Him.

I have been asked to preach here today because I am the chairman of Dr Plume's Trust. Dr Plume was Vicar of Greenwich and Archdeacon of Rochester in the latter part of C17. He was born in Maldon and studied at Christ's College Cambridge. It was the period of the Civil War and its aftermath and, with that background, Plume might have been expected to side with parliament and the Puritans. It appears, however, that even during Cromwell's Protectorate he was a loyal member of the Church of England and a monarchist. Nevertheless, he was presented to the living of Greenwich by Richard Cromwell (Oliver's son) and, after the Restoration of Charles II, when the Anglicans and monarchists were in the ascendant, he worked for a settlement which would include the Puritans in both Church and state. It seems, therefore, that Plume managed to combine loyalty to his own tradition with respect for the beliefs of others who disagreed with him – something we need to hang on to in a world in which, on the one hand, fanatical fundamentalists can see no good in those who do not agree with them, and, on the other hand, liberal multiculturalists find themselves unable to defend any one vision for society intellectually against any other. Can we have a clear idea of what we believe in and still respect those who strongly disagree with us? Have we the confidence to attempt to build a world on the strength of our beliefs, while having the humility to admit that we may be wrong and that the whole edifice might need to be reconstructed according to a new, more perfect, plan?

Plume, at the time of his death in 1704, was a bachelor and a wealthy man and he made a number of endowments reflecting his beliefs and hopes for the world. One obvious bequest was for the maintenance of his tomb at Longfield. By the standards of the time, it was a mark of his humility that he chose to be buried in what was then a very out of the way place in a plain grave outside the church, rather than a magnificent vault within. The Church entrusts its pastors with power and authority, but only so that they can be effective pastors, not, in the words of the Saviour, in order that they may exercise lordship, but so that, like Jesus, they might serve. Archdeacons and scholars are buried just like the rest of us – in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life.

Thomas Plume also endowed a professor's chair at Cambridge in the area of astronomy, physics and mathematics. Why was a clergyman interested in such things? Read Psalm 19. *The heavens declare the glory of God: and the firmament sheweth his handy-work.* Stars and planets, the psalm goes on, cannot speak, but their very existence proclaims the Word of

God. The psalm segues into a celebration of God's Law and finishes with the prayer that the words of our mouth and the meditations of our hearts will be always acceptable to the Lord, our strength and redeemer. Everything we can learn may potentially deepen our knowledge of God, our communion with Him. To know God is to have eternal life.

Plume also instructed that his professor should not be confined merely to the world of academia. He was to be available to anyone who sought knowledge. The knowledge of God is not just for specialists, for the clergy and theologians. The Way to God is open to everyone. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Plume was a great supporter of the 1662 Prayer Book and one of its great insights is that we have only one *Mediator and Advocate*, the One *Who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world;* The way to God is open to everyone and that way is Jesus. We may need clergy, teachers and learned academics, but they are not there to stand between us and the Truth; they are there to help us all to find the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Plume also built and endowed a library in his home town of Maldon. This too was to be open to everybody who had a serious interest in scholarship – not merely for those with academic credentials. The biggest portrait in the Maldon Library is of William Laud, briefly my predecessor as Rector of Cuxton, and better known as Charles I's Archbishop of Canterbury, who met his death on the scaffold in 1645. Depending on your point of view, Laud was a cruel and arrogant man, whose actions helped cause the Civil War, or he was a deeply committed churchman and scholar, who did a great deal to advance the causes of religion and education. No doubt it was for the latter that Plume admired Laud.

Plume also endowed the parishes of Dartford and Gravesend with funds to support their teaching ministry. This is why I am here today and the reason why Dartford parish now receives £1,850 per annum from the trust.

Plume was also concerned that, in his day, many of the clergy were distracted from their pastoral duties and their preaching and teaching by their poverty. He therefore provided a fund for the relief of necessitous clergyman in the Diocese of Rochester. We trustees of this fund are able to give up to £3,000 to clergymen who have fallen on hard times – which is less unusual than you might think even today. It is not only a matter of preaching and teaching the Word orally, but of living the Word by caring for those in need. God is love and we are the children of God only if we share in that love and we cannot truly claim to share His love unless we act as loving people.

Finally, Plume also was a founder member of SPCK and SPG – two charities for spreading the Word of God in this country and abroad, to the Church and to the unbelieving world.

The message of Advent is to prepare to receive the Word of God. There are so many ways in which He might come to us. *O Lord, open thou our lips. And our mouth shall shew forth thy praise.*