

You probably noticed that the readings we have just listened to did not tell the story of the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem. That was a story for night-time and for darkness. It is the story we heard last night. It was a story that was preparing us for the daylight. We are now well and truly in the daylight, and the readings we have just heard reflect this. They fill out the message of Christmas.

To appreciate what is going on, we need to take ourselves back to the beginning of the Bible and the creation of the world. You will remember that God created the world in seven days. The story begins in darkness and chaos, and on the first day God says, "Let there be light". The light comes and sweeps away the darkness. On the sixth day, God says, "Let us make human beings in our own image". This is the culmination of creation. For the six days, God speaks a word that creates new life in the world. God's word brings light in darkness, order in chaos, and vitality to all living creatures. God's word makes human beings to be like God and to enjoy a good life with God. So, God's word is an expression of God's love, especially God's love for all people.

We know, of course, that things didn't work out as planned and that the man and the woman disobeyed God's word. This then becomes part of the human story. It is a story of the people refusing to listen to God's word, but also a story of God staying with them as they wander in the desert. They become nomads, and God stays faithful to them in their nomadic wanderings. God still speaks to them, and his word is a powerful word that does what he says he will do. God's word saves them when they are in trouble, guides them back to him when they wander off, satisfies them when they are hungry and thirsty. But still, they struggle to live as the image of God in the world.

It is only with the birth of Jesus that God's original plan for all of creation begins to be fulfilled. Today's gospel tells us that with the coming of Jesus, God has spoken his word once again, and that word is Jesus. He is the Word of God. St John tells us in the Gospel that "the Word became flesh". He also tells us that this word is the word of God that was spoken at the creation of the world, in the beginning. I think he is suggesting that with the birth of Jesus we have God's final word of creation. The birth of Jesus signals the new creation. This means that God is even closer to us now than he was at the beginning.

In the time before Jesus, the people recognised God through the things that God did in the world, or the things that he spoke through the prophets. But now, with the birth of Jesus, God takes on human flesh. God becomes one of us. Now we see very clearly what it means to say that human beings are created in the image of God. There are two things we can learn from this fact. The first is that we are drawn into the divine life. This shows us what our potential is. Our whole life is about growing into the divine life – growing into the image of God. The second thing to learn is that if we want to know how to live as the image of God then we need only look at Jesus. He shows us what it is to be truly human.

There is another important piece of information in the gospel story. We are familiar with the expression, “the Word became flesh and lived among us”. That is what we heard in the gospel, and it is the way it is translated in our Bibles. But it is probably more literally translated as “the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us”. This is reminiscent of that time when the people of God wandered in the desert, regularly pitching their tent as they moved from one place to another. Living together, side-by-side in tents, formed them into a people and gave them their identity. Now we are told that with the birth of Jesus, God has pitched his tent among us. Think of what this means! Above all, it means that God is very close to us, and knows what life is like in our tent. God is there to share with us all the joys and excitement that we experience. But God is also there to share the strife, hurt and injury. This, too, is how we grow into the image of God – because God is there walking with us on our pilgrim journey of life.

The gospel story of God’s word becoming flesh goes on to say that those who accept God’s word become God’s children. This is a bold statement by St John. As we hear it on this Christmas day, I think he is saying that the whole point of Christmas is that it points not only to what God has done in the birth of Jesus, but also to what it says about us. We can put it this way: Christmas is God’s gift to us. This gift is God’s word that transforms us and transforms our world. It is a precious gift that is a sign of God’s love for each of us. On this Christmas day, let’s receive this gift with grateful hearts.