Sermon preached at St Mark's 4 February 2024 (2nd before Lent)

Proverbs 8.22-32, John 1.1-14

'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.'

Hang on, you'll say. Haven't we heard this passage from John's gospel really recently, at Christmas? Isn't it the solemn announcement about the meaning of the incarnation? Well, indeed it is, but today we are hearing it again because the Sundays just before Lent focus on who exactly Jesus is – what is his identity and what was his mission on earth for? That's a question which it appears Jesus himself focused on, during his time in the desert which we will be remembering in Lent.

But I want to approach this majestic text from a slightly different angle first, one that fits with the approach that we're taking in our Lent groups this year, on nourishing ways to read the bible. Now it's easy to think of the bible as a single monolithic text – *the* bible. But of course it's actually a big collection of diverse texts, created over several centuries, by different writers addressing particular communities in the context of a range of contemporary issues. And lots of the writers of scripture argue with or echo or reinterpret earlier texts. So we too can honour the bible not by just passively listening but by real engagement, reaction and questioning.

I want to start with the question that must have faced the writer of John's gospel as he sat down to his task. Namely, how on earth do you start the writing of a gospel? And anyway, what is a gospel? Anyone who sits down to write has to make a choice about what kind of thing they're writing: is this a novel, or a sermon, or a letter, or a political argument, or a set of guidelines, or a stand up comedy script? Writers choose a genre to write within.

Now I'm a believer in the power of the ordinary reader to get a great deal out of tackling the bible yourself, using just common sense, an enquiring mind and an open heart. And I don't believe that we should leave the bible and its interpretation to be captured by only one section of the Church. So – particularly if it's been a while since

you read the bible or heard it other than in worship – why not have a go at some literary biblical analysis and compare the start of each of the four gospels? Grab your bible or at least your smartphone and have a go. Begin with the earliest - Mark. This writer is often quite wrongly seen as rather simplistic, but in fact he was a stunningly creative writer, who effectively invented a whole new genre – the gospel. There is nothing in the ancient world that compares to these accounts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. There are a few Roman biographies, but they aren't like gospels. No, Mark, I believe, is boldly having a go at creating a new piece of scripture. He starts straight in with dashing, active narrative about the adult Jesus who erupts onto the scene. And his style takes as its model the narrative style of the OT books of Samuel. These are the oldest texts in the Hebrew scriptures and tell the stories of Samuel, Saul, and David – the development of the monarchy. This long arc of narrative is about the same era as the written-down books of Homer, and in my view is an equally amazing work of world literature. It cracks on with the narrative, seldom dwelling on interior thoughts of characters or editorial views, but reveals who people are through their actions, and advances the action through robust dialogue. It's very human. The reader is left to make up their own mind about what it all means. I think it's thanks to Mark's choice of this supple, spare Hebrew style that we have such readable and vivid gospel texts to relate to.

Because Matthew and Luke very much copy Mark's approach, while adding their own interesting touches. Matthew's gospel starts with a real nerd's delight, namely a long genealogy which purports to chart Jesus' bloodline right back to David and Abraham. Actually it's a bit more interesting than it looks, as it features what some have called a series of 'shady ladies', of whom the last is Mary. It's a kind of seal of historical legitimacy that comes before the gospel launches into the story of Jesus' birth, from Joseph's point of view. I'll leave you to spot Matthew's deliberate mistake. But note how in the rest of the first two chapters, the writer of Matthew keeps relating elements of the story back to previous scriptures that are being fulfilled. In Matthew's time, it was common for devout Jewish groups to study prophetic books of scripture line by line and link them to contemporary figures or events. But Matthew turns this around, implicitly claiming that the life of Jesus is itself a new scripture, to which

around, implicitly claiming that the life of Jesus is itself a new scripture, to which many diverse ancient writings must now bear witness.

Luke starts his gospel quite differently, with a preface to an imagined reader Theophilus, or lover of God, reassuring him that the following narrative is reliably researched history. This preface is written in much more complex language than the gospels normally use, reflecting what was perhaps the writer's normal educated formal style. But then he too (thank God!) takes us back to the simple, robust narrative style of the books of Samuel, even depicting characters and events that deliberately echo those stories. Mary is like a new Hannah, who was the mother of Samuel, her Magnificat almost word for word the song of Hannah.

Finally we are back to John's gospel, and how he begins it. He chooses to craft a highly wrought sermon – in fact it's so dense it's almost a creed - which mines the resonances of Hebrew scripture in a different way. 'In the beginning' – where have we heard that phrase before? It's at the start of the book of Genesis 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'. Not content with tracing Jesus back to David and Abraham, the writer of John traces him back to before the moment of creation, and identifies him with the word of God. Throughout that famous creation story, we see everything coming into being as God speaks: 'And God said, let there be light'. Throughout the OT, God's word is depicted not just as speech but as the powerful agent of creation, of making things happen. All Jewish hearers would have got these echoes. But John also addresses the Graeco-Roman mindset with his emphasis on the Greek for Word 'Logos'. It's where we get all our 'ology' words from. The Logos was understood as the rational organising principle of the cosmos, that keeps everything in being.

It would take a long time to pick out all the layers of meaning this writer weaves into the passage we heard today. But another important echo is highlighted in the OT reading we heard from the book of Proverbs, which speaks as if in the voice of Holy Wisdom. She's an interestingly feminine figure who it seems was there before the moment of creation, watching and delighting as the earth and the heavens were established, at God's side like a skilled advisor – you could almost say that without

her nothing was made that was made. Influenced by the culture of Babylon where they spent decades in exile, the Israelites had developed a wisdom literature which began to speak of aspects of God, like God's wisdom or God's holy presence, in

terms that almost personified these qualities, giving them a voice. There's no doubt that the writer of John is using these echoes, implicitly identifying Jesus with the wisdom of God, as well as God's word.

We are deep in the realms of the cosmos, and of the profound nature of God. And then suddenly we come to the crunch verse 14: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' It is so familiar, it may just make us feel rather solemn, and devout, and quite Christmassy. However, I think the earliest hearers of this extraordinary sermon of John's would have been pretty much horrified. For Jews, God is not born; that's blasphemy. For Greeks, the Logos, the underlying principle of the universe, can't descend into flesh and blood in a particular body, place and time. That's nonsense: how does the cosmos still hold up, for heaven's sake?

You see, the bible, including these new scriptures that are the gospels, is quite often shocking. John's sermon expects a dramatic reaction – a turning towards or away from what is an apocalyptic and dangerous claim. ('His own received him not'). After lulling the hearers with a sense of 'O, yes, we recognise this thought world', it can suddenly pack a punch which aims to make us decide. So are we clutching our pearls or are we letting ourselves be drawn in to something which offers us a new story, a new reality, a new creation?

The bible is not boring. It is not simple. It is complex and vivid, and inspiring, and frustrating. It has been used for good, and it has been misused for evil. We are allowed, indeed encouraged, to have a whole range of feelings when we read the bible, including anger or ambivalence. But we need to get stuck in and argue about it, and have our own thoughts as we wrestle with our precious tradition. This Lent, give yourself permission to open that good book again and share your honest reactions. Join a Lent group, or at least come and hear Miranda speak tomorrow night.

And receive refreshment, experience the shock of the old, start to reclaim faith roots which you may almost have relinquished, or which you fear may almost have relinquished you. I’ll see you there.