

Christmas Day 2018

John 1:1-14

I will talk about Christmas, I promise, but I need to start somewhere else; there is something I need to explain.

Years ago, I worked in a Cambridge College. Now, it is a truth universally acknowledged that all the best places are run by deans. In Magdalene, there was a Dean of Chapel (me), and a Dean of College, whose job was *discipline*. He had to deal with bad behaviour. This is a true story. The morning after the hockey club dinner, he summoned the team. The conversation went like this

There was a bit of an issue last night, he said
Really? they replied, *we don't think so.*
Ah, you see I heard you were on the lawn in second court
(undergraduates are not allowed on college lawns)
Oh... yes, I am sorry, I think a couple of us were on the lawn,
But that was all you got up to, nothing more?
No, No, nothing more
Mmmm, I was told you moved some college property
O, I think we might have bumped into one of those big barrier things sorry.
Just bumped into it?
Yes
Ah, you see I was told you carried two of the barriers out on to the lawn
Oh... I suppose we might have done that
...And then you used them as hurdles
Yes, I am sorry, there might have been hurdling
I see, but no other issues you can think of
No, I don't think so
Because I heard you were naked

The point here is that you need the whole story. Only when you have the whole story can you make a judgement.

You need the whole story. That's why we have just heard that striking bit of scripture: *In the beginning was the Word*. It was John's gospel, the only gospel we are *required* to read at Christmas. You would think, wouldn't you, that, at Christmas, we would read the story of the shepherds, or the wise men and the star perhaps? But no, the one reading we *must* have is this one: *In the beginning was the Word*, because you have to have the *whole* story.

If it is shepherds you want, that is Luke's gospel, which is also where you find angels, swaddling bands and a manger. Luke, you see, wants to tell us that Jesus was born in obscurity and greeted by poor shepherds. If you are after wise men, that is Matthew. Matthew wants us to know that Herod, a bad king, wanted to kill Jesus, but foreign, Gentiles came to worship him. He is making a point about faith. Luke and Matthew are *both* right. It takes a number of voices to put the whole story together. Mark, by the way, does not mention the birth at all. He starts his gospel with a quotation from a prophet to show that we always knew this would happen. He is quite right about that, too.

John has something quite different to say. *In the beginning was the Word*. 'In the beginning', it is a quotation. We are supposed to notice that. John starts his gospel with exactly the same words that start the Old Testament, *In the beginning*. This is Genesis, which starts at the beginning and tells us about creation. *In the beginning was the Word*, John really is telling us the whole story, starting with creation.

Christmas is indeed shepherds, mangers, stars and wise men. But, it is much more than that. You have to tell the whole story. You need to know that this baby is Jesus is the Son of God. You need to know be clear that this Jesus is the *same* God who poured out of himself in creation, *in the beginning*.

Let's just be clear. Mathew, Mark, Luke and John do not disagree. They all use quotations from the Old Testament. They all know that the story of Jesus was *always* the story. They know that Christmas is not a 'one night in Bethlehem story', but a story about everything and forever; a story about who we are and where we are going. When you have a story as big as that, it takes some telling, you have to remember the bit about being on the lawn *and* the furniture, *and* the hurdling *and* even the bit about taking off your clothes.

The reason you have to remember the whole Christmas story is because it makes all the difference. Christmas is indeed a story about an obscure family in a one-horse town on the backside of the empire. It is also a story about kings and emperors and beliefs. Of course, Christmas is all about a baby, and a manger, and a star, and even a donkey if that is what you look for. But, it is not *just* a story that happened all those years ago, in history... once. It is not a story told so that we can look back and remember that Jesus said and did some things we should remember. This morning John is tugging at our sleeve and urging us to notice that this story started at the beginning and goes on forever. This is the explanation for everything.

In the beginning was the Word. John is telling us that, from the very beginning, God gave us the explanation. You have to tell the whole story. You have to do that and go on doing that, even when it seems almost impossible. John says as much, *The light shines in the darkness*, he says. God speaks the Word and gives the explanation and we do not accept it. It is the story, but a lot of people will not listen.

It is hard telling the whole story. It is challenging. We keep *this* Christmas amidst all the uncertainty and division of the Brexit debate. We are besieged with fake news and all those people twisting the story. Worse than that we are surrounded by people who are quite sure there is not story that gathers up everything, explains all of it. So much of our conversation, our politics, our culture is determined by fear, by division, and by austerity. It is always a conversation about less not more, a conversation about some not many, a story about us and them. Again and again a conversation that refuse to tell the whole story, it is always less. A qualified hope, a defended belief and it is always for some not others.

What do we say about Christmas, in the midst of this crisis? We say that this is light in our darkness. The baby in Bethlehem was born in a divided nation, in an empire in retreat. Jesus was born in crisis and died in crisis. He spoke peace and he spoke reconciliation. He spoke of all creation and to outcasts and the excluded. He came precisely to this world, to us, in our need. Christian faith always refuses to believe in less. We say that this gospel is for everyone, forever. We say that promises that benefit the few and feed our divisions are poisonous. We say that the whole story has to be told and that it is for all of us.

The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory... full of grace and truth. There is still hope; there will be glory. There has to be the whole story and the whole story is rich and generous and sure.

We can and we will say *Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year*. Let this Christmas be a witness against all those who think we should settle for less. Let this Christmas be the whole story for everyone, forever.