

and the Word became flesh

a sermon preached at

Christmas

25 December 2017

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by father ken hewlett

the lections: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1: 1-4; John 1:1-14.

Connections are very much part of our life. We connect in special ways with other people, with places, with situations that are part of our family stories. Christmas began with the greatest, yet least anticipated, connection of all: 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us'.

A past Bishop of Winchester tells the marvellous story of a nativity play that was performed in his cathedral – a nativity play with all the last minute hitches. In the final scene, two wise men and one wise woman jostled for camera space as Mary squeezed a plastic doll Jesus. A small angel waved to his parents in the second row-when suddenly from behind the backdrop a baby began to cry – it was the hungry cry of a tiny baby, belonging to a mother acting as a prop assistant. But from where the Bishop sat it seemed to come straight from the bundle in Mary's arms. For one instant the whole crowd in the cathedral froze – and the man sitting next to the bishop shouted in the silence, 'Jesus Christ!'.

In that heart stopping moment, Word became flesh for cynical adults who thought they had seen it all before and who had long since stopped making the connection.

It does seem for some of us that the adult view of Christmas is to stop making connections for two or three days each year. It is tempting to view God and his world through those tinsel-tinted spectacles that make us surprised at the occasional glimpse we have; that Word is not contained in a Christmas Carol or Children's nativity play but in a real life baby's gurgle: 'Jesus Christ!' Yet as in that children's nativity story, the moment of peace quickly passes and normality is restored.

As we celebrate Christmas each year there is the reality we receive of God's blessing of us through the powerful reminder that indeed God is with us in the birth of Jesus – Our Emmanuel – the coming of heaven to earth. We also know the all too human response of wanting to leave the blessing behind and make sure that God is not too present in our day-to-day lives in our day-to-day connections.

There is a visually arresting Botticelli painting entitled; *The Mystic Nativity*. The Holy Family are housed in a thatched roofed stable in an Italianate landscape, looking serenely upon a new-born boy resembling that plastic baby doll in our nativity play. The atmosphere is peace and contentment, except for the very top and bottom margins of the painting. Botticelli obviously decided that the painting would not be complete without two lines of dancing angels. And I mean dancing! Arms entwined, in a frenzy of activity as they celebrate the reality of the birth beneath them and above them. But the more you look at the painting the more you think that the angels cannot possible keep it up – the dancing will have to come to an end like our feeling of blessing at Christmas time.

But does it? The scripture readings at this time of the year are all about making connections: St John in the first chapter of his gospel account is furiously making connections – eloquently professing them one after another, that we receive from the fullness of God's grace.

God continues the dance, continues to make connections between heaven and earth, between promise and fulfilment, between word and flesh. God pays no heed to human made divisions; this is a God who has a history of visiting and caring for his people, we are part of that living history, invited to join in the dance of the angels. The word, the tune of the dance, is God's faithfulness – God's steadfast love. The tune – and hence our ability to sing with God – is sustained by a God with us, well beyond that first touch of Incarnation, that connection of love.

There are connections still to be made that will enable the most weary and foot sore to return to the dance when reasons for celebration seem long past. For God's track record is second to none; if we can really connect Christmas to the rest of our lives we might well experience more blessing and love than we expect from God who is so deeply and lovingly connected to us. We need to strive to be open to these invitations of connection and to not shy away from them. Love came to us at Christmas time. Let us treasure that love and share it generously with each other in our journey of life that is before us all.

'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth'.