



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 4 January by the Reverend Canon Tim Stevens, Canon Precentor

The Second Sunday of Christmas

*And the Word was made flesh, and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth.*

Familiar words.

Words which we heard this morning in our Gospel reading.

Less than two weeks after Christmas, these words could feel a little bit repetitive, given that we heard them at Midnight Mass as well.

When we heard these words at Christmas, the Cathedral was full. Who it was filled with, who heard this message, we may not know.

For some, it may have been their one and only, annual, trip to Church, in which case, this Gospel reading will be the only one they ever hear – every year, as the clock tips from Christmas Eve to Christmas Day, the Word was made flesh, and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

But why, for those of us who are still here on this Second Sunday of Christmas, do we hear this so familiar Gospel reading again?

I'm sure that we could all come up with different answers to this question, and I'm just as sure that if we did, there would be many common threads running through them.

I would like to propose this morning, that the reason we need to hear this passage again is as a reminder that the Christmas message is not just for Midnight Mass, but begins the next part of our journey.

In this reading, we begin at the beginning – and at the beginning, the Word was, and was with God, and brought all things into being. This is about our relationship with one who precedes us all, who brought life into being.

And then, there is the middle – this Word was in the world, but the world did not know him. But to those who did receive him and believed in his name, he gave power to become Children of God.

And further, there is the end – this Word, became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

A beginning, a middle and an end.

That's that, and unless we choose to grow in our relationship with God, then that is the end until we come back next Christmas and hear it all over again!!

So, as we hear these words again this morning, what does it mean to live in relationship with one who was before creation began? What does it mean to become Children of God? And what does it mean to see the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth?

This is why, less than two weeks after Christmas, we hear this Gospel reading a second time.

If, at Midnight Mass, we were reminded of the beginning, taken through the middle, and reached the end, sung a few joy-filled carols, and went home to wake up the next morning to our turkeys and brussels sprouts, then yes, this is the end.

But today, we hear an additional four verses, and we begin all over again.

The end is not the end at all, but a new beginning. This word becoming flesh, this Messiah taking human form, this Son of God living among the people of the earth, as we heard, brings Grace and Truth.

And this is the new beginning which brings us back. As we heard in verse seventeen, the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

No more "Word". The Word has been given a name. This is Jesus, who came to make all things new, to bring grace and truth, and to make God known.

Well, we, gathered here, have come back since Christmas, and I would hate to leave us all so baffled now by this, that we don't come back again – but it does feel like a lot of words, a lot of theology, a lot of mystery still.

But, to help us to understand what this grace and truth is, what Jesus came to bring, we have S Paul.

We heard in our first reading, the prayer at the beginning of S Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

It is widely believed that S Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesians while he was in prison. He had visited Ephesus. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that he had spent at least two years there.

When S Paul arrived in Ephesus, the small number of Christians there had been baptised by John, were at the beginning of their journey, and had not even heard of the Holy Spirit. Their understanding was so partial. And S Paul taught them, and they heard. They wept when he left them. They were changed.

But some years later, S Paul feels the need to write from prison, and teach them again, take their understanding further.

Many of S Paul's letters are written to correct, or even reprimand, those he is writing to. But not this one. The Ephesians haven't done anything wrong – they don't need to be told off, or to be put right. This is, in many ways, an unusual letter. S Paul seems simply to be writing to help them to hear again – perhaps in exactly the same way that we, on this Second Sunday of Christmas, hear again the good news from S John's Gospel.

But for us this morning, these two passages go so well together.

By exploring these words of S Paul to the Ephesians, the end becomes the end only of the verses chosen to be read at Midnight Mass, but for those who come back to hear more, it offers a new beginning.

These verses are all about what is new through the coming of Jesus Christ. Look closely at them, and you will see that in verse three, we are given a new energy – being blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

Look further, and in verse five you will see that we have a new status – adopted as God's Children through Jesus Christ.

Carry on still further, and in verses seven and eight you will find a new freedom – that we have redemption through Christ's blood and forgiveness according to his grace.

Even that isn't the end, because in verses ten to twelve, we hear of our new purpose – to work for God in gathering up all people, and to live for the praise of Christ's glory.

Lots of newness – new energy, new status, new freedom, and new purpose.

Through the coming of Jesus Christ, all things are new, and part of this newness, for the Ephesians, is that they are to be taken by this energy, are to recognise their new place and status as children of God, are to rejoice in the new freedom which this brings, and are to fulfil God's purpose for them, as they draw all people into that same newness.

That's the final message which S Paul has for the Ephesians, as he lies in prison. That's the reinforcing of all of his teaching. That's the moment when S Paul, who himself found newness and hope in Jesus Christ, lays clearly on the line the role and responsibility of the Ephesian Church.

That's part two of the message for the Ephesians. They have heard before, but now they look deeper, and are drawn into all else that S Paul will go on to say to them, as well as all that their life in Christ will bring.

This morning, we hear once again the opening verses of S John's Gospel, which we have heard before, but now we look deeper. We are drawn into all else that we are promised. We hear those extra verses, that despite the Law of Moses, Grace and Truth come through Jesus Christ, and we are offered new energy, new status, new freedom, new purpose.

Perhaps we could add to this, the new beginning, the new hope, or the new relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ.

But a relationship goes both ways, and here as we gather this morning, this is our call to respond.

We, with the Ephesians, are called to live for the praise of Christ's glory. What does that mean for us, at this point of new beginning?

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