

Comforted and Confronted by the Word Made Flesh

Sermon for Christmas Day, St Philip's Church, O'Connor, ACT

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

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

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

“And the 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” (John 1: 14).

Perhaps you know the American comic genius Mel Brooks, who gave us that much-loved Cold War spoof *Get Smart*, then movies like *Young Frankenstein* and the unforgettable *Blazing Saddles*. Mel Brooks has a less-well-known film called *Silent Movie*, which is, you guessed it, a silent movie, about Mel Brooks' character actually making a silent movie. There are the usual silent movie subtitles to explain what's going on, but there's no talk, only music. Except that one word is spoken, only one word in the whole movie. Mel Brooks is contacting the prospective cast, with his offers of a role and their responses appearing in subtitles. He telephones the famous French mime, Marcel Marceau, who appears in his customary costume, top hat and makeup, struggling against a strong wind blowing through

the French doors on his way to answer the telephone. He picks up the receiver with a theatrical flourish and there in subtitles is Mel Brooks' invitation, 'do you want to be in my silent movie?', to which the famous mime utters the one word we hear in the whole film: 'Non'.

Friends, our God has only one word for us, one word to say. This word is at the root of all created reality, as we hear in Hebrews and in John today; it's a particular word to all humanity, yet it has particular resonance for God's own ancient people, as we hear in Isaiah this morning. But it's a word that still comes as a surprise, because this is not the word that most people expect from God.

Friends, this Word constitutes the ground of being for all creation, and yet it's an intimately personal word taking the form of a particular human life. The God whose love and relationality, whose light and energy are discerned by the mystics throughout all creation, enacts God's loving commitment to that creation by continuing to shape it, by stepping up for it, by coming forth into the light of creation personally, humanly. This is the story we celebrate here in every Eucharist, where God continues to become flesh in the life of our world of matter and history veiled in the sacramental bread and wine—to sustain, to enliven, to challenge, to transform.

Friends, here we learn that there's no fundamental dualism between matter and spirit, despite the Church's legacy of Greek metaphysics. Here we learn that God is *with* us and consistently *for* us, as the inbuilt compass and the close companion and the personal trainer who we meet in Jesus Christ. Jesus didn't come to be a harsh moralist and he's not here to transact some sort of weird payment to an angry God on the cross. No, compared to that the word from God that we hear in Jesus Christ is completely unexpected.

This unexpected word is good news to those who can receive it, as we hear in today's Gospel, but a lot of people can't hear it and if they can they can't bear it, so they reject it: "he came to his own people and his own people received him not". For so many people, God means control and repression and fairy tales unsuitable for a grown up world, so that this single unexpected word of God, which spells out vulnerability and freedom and world-transforming wisdom either doesn't compute, or else it represents too much of a threat.

All around us in our world today we see fear at work: fear of lost control, of lost advantage, and fear of facing what has to be done because it will bring too much change to our accustomed way of life. Our world is full of untapped technical potential for addressing our besetting problems if only we had the love, the faith, the nerve to embrace what's called for. But we don't. Instead we deny the threat;

we blame everyone but ourselves and build walls of exclusion; we silence the prophets, from John the Baptist to Greta Thunberg, and hence we settle for Trump's version of American greatness, or for Boris's Little Britain, or for selling ourselves short with the ad man's slogan 'How Good's Australia?'

Friends, this is just what we should expect because we don't want a Word like this, let alone such a word made flesh. Instead, we prefer ideology and exclusion, self-assertion and denial, because these are familiar and they promise control—not like the thoroughly unexpected actual Word of God, in whose warm human flesh God took his chance on earth. But, friends, instead we can be shaped by a word that isn't born in violence, that isn't the blah blah blah of our unreconstructed human nature, and that doesn't represent the anxious bullying of patriarchy—that is, we can find ourselves among those “who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of a man but of God” (John 1: 13).

So, friends, in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh and pressed into our palms in the blessed sacrament today, we meet God's eternal nature, we recognise God's indwelling closeness in the evolutionary outworking of creation, and we encounter God within our wonderful, vulnerable human condition.

This is a Word that is not what's expected—a word that few are willing and able to hear let alone receive with joy. But given all the words that we do hear around us in the world today, this is the Word that humanity needs to receive and to embrace more than ever.

The Lord be with you ...