

CHRISTMAS I 26 December 2021

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White in St Mark's Church, Bridgewater, Connecticut

Isaiah 6.10-62.3; Psalm 147.13-21; Galatians 3.23-25; 4.4-7; John 1.1-18

Every year on the Sunday after Christmas Day the appointed Gospel is the very first eighteen verses of St John's Gospel, the so called 'Prologue'. The first book in all of Scripture, the *Book of Genesis*, starts with the words, 'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth' and goes on to tell a story about how all things came to be. (In fact, it tells two rather different stories)

Very deliberately, John begins his Gospel with the very same words, 'In the beginning', and then tells his version of the creation of all things with an emphasis on Jesus – 'The Word'—and the role of The Word, through whom all things come into being. (And remember that in Genesis God speaks—there are words: 'Let there be light'—and Light comes into being.) Words—The Word—create.

And whilst *Genesis* continues with how the sky, the earth, the seas, vegetation, and so forth, each comes to be (all with words, The Word), John skips all of this and cuts at once to the story of the salvation of the created and imperfect world, God's actions in order to bring human beings into God's intentions for who we are to become. (The \$50 word for this is the *heilsgeschichte*. the Salvation History.) And Jesus, The Word, is the focus of it: John is writing a new creation story, a new *Genesis* and a new beginning to all of Scripture, centered on Jesus and his life amongst us.

And we Episcopalians are familiar with this Salvation History because, each time we come to Eucharist, the Eucharistic prayer begins with some recollection of it. John writes that Jesus came into the world so as to reveal what it is truly to be alive, and that this life is the light of the world. John the Baptist witnessed that this was the true life and light of God which bestows on each of us the power truly to become more than creatures of God but instead children of God, receiving 'grace upon grace'. And John writes, sadly, that Jesus 'was in the world, and the world did not know him. He came to what was his own—the Holy People of God—and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him and believed in his name he [did give] power to become' truly God's children.'

Which is another way of saying what we are going to hear from the altar in just a few minutes. We will hear the words of Eucharistic Prayer B: 'We give thanks to you, O God, for the goodness and love which you have made known to us in creation; in the calling of Israel to be your people; in your Word spoken through the Prophets; and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus your Son. For in these last days you sent him to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary, to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world. In him, you have brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.'

This is a version of John's Prologue: it is the *heilsgeschichte*, and we hear something similar to it each time we come for Eucharist.

The Salvation History is John's insistence that words create, even our own words: they create pain or they provide comfort; they create despair and grief or they create joy and build up love. It is also John's insistence that God is always moving in our world, seeking us to become the creatures—the beloved children—who love as much as they are loved.

There is an old tradition, now much fallen out of general use, that John's Prologue is read, proclaimed, at the very end of most Eucharistic liturgies, when it is known as the 'Last Gospel'. The point is to remind us once again of the Salvation History and of our parts in that history, of how 'he came into the world and the world did not know him'; of how most of us human beings 'did not accept him' but how those few who did receive him were wonderfully changed.

The Last Gospel is both cautionary and also so very encouraging: we hear an invitation to keep it fresh in our ears as we leave church and go out into the world, alerted to look and to listen for God's promptings, and then to respond as we ourselves are loved. Amen.