

2nd Sunday after Christmas  
(Ecclesiasticus 24:1-2.8-12 / John 1:1-18)  
03.01.2016

While no one would doubt that our community gives a central place to the inspired word of God in the Sacred Scriptures (which is only right, since the magisterial teaching of the Catholic Church is clear, stating in more than one place that *The inspired word of God is the first source of all Christian spirituality*) the point I want to make this morning, in the light of our gospel reading (the Prologue of St John's gospel) is that **the word of God is first and foremost a person.**

**The Word of God is Jesus-Christ.** In Jesus, *the Word became flesh and lived among us.* For John, *the Word* became incarnate. **The Word is a person and not a text!**

As an incarnate being, *the Word is not just a message to deliver, but a person to know.* John's writings emphasise the importance of *knowing* in a particular sense. For John, **knowing means loving.** *Knowing* someone means being in a loving, life-giving, relationship with that person.

The *Word of God* well and truly took on human flesh in the man Jesus. I find great consolation and strength in a short statement found in the Second Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*. Therein we read: *The Son of God ... worked with human hands; He thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart He loved.*

I am sure we can all draw strength from those words, an encouragement to rejoice in and live our own humanity as the Lord desires we should: and that is nothing less than fully, which implies *in love!*

It is when we live this way (fully, in love!) that we realise our vocation which is to share in the very life of God.

We might ask: just how many of us dare to live our humanity fully?

Unfortunately, as Christians – men and women who really should emphasise the dignity of our human nature – we are more inclined to shy away from it than to well and truly live it.

We erroneously cut ourselves off from our humanity in so many ways.

There are parts of our human nature which we somehow think alien to God when, in fact, they are His gift to us.

Just think of how the Church/the Churches (and individual Christians) have feared the human body and human sexuality, including the emotions that go with loving others!

*Gaudium et Spes* states clearly that *Jesus loved with a human heart.*

What dignity and value that statement gives to the feelings of love we hold in our hearts!

The man Jesus knew what it meant to be flooded with feelings. As one woman Scripture scholar, who is also formed in the human sciences, reminds us: *Jesus, the Incarnate Word, was a man who dared to be a friend to others, whose arms knew how to hug, whose genitals felt desire, whose heart yearned for love.*

The plea I address to you this morning – and I try to hear it for myself, as I share it with you – is a plea to dare to rejoice in and live the God-given gift of our humanity, seeing it not as a hindrance or an obstacle to our Christian living, but the very way that leads us to union with God.

*God became man, so that we humans might become God,* as the famous adage associated with the Church Fathers puts it.

*The Word became flesh* so that we might know God's love. *The Word became flesh* so that we might learn from Him how to live our humanity. *The Word became flesh* to reconcile us with God – saying that, I would hasten to add, that the very first step on this path to reconciliation with God is our reconciliation with our own humanity.

If, as St Gregory of Nyssa teaches, *God was so moved by love to descend to human nature and visit it,* I add, He was moved further still. He was moved enough to dare to become one with us, one of us! The question that begs attention then is this: Why should we be so afraid of our humanity that we sometimes hear it spoken of in disparaging ways? Do we not all so often hear it referred to as

base? People speak of *our base human nature*?

(Maybe some of us may be tempted to use that term ourselves, or to think in this way.)

It is so unfortunate when we forget or lose sight of the humanity of Christ. We end up doing ourselves great damage. Keeping Christ's human nature in sight we are helped to live our own humanity. We no longer see our humanity as base, but worthy of proper honour, respect and dignity.

In saying all this, I have before my mind's eye an illumination from a manuscript of the Sacred Scriptures. This illumination was used to illustrate John's statement *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*. It shows the Christ-child – not laid in a manger – but lying in His naked human flesh, gently nestling on an open book (a Bible). The child Jesus is cradled in the first letter of the first word of the gospel.

This illustration makes the point remarkably well that the Word of God really took on our human nature. It displays that God's Word is more than a text. It shows us that the Word of God is well and truly a person: the child born of Mary.

The illumination of this manuscript of the Prologue of John's gospel underlines for us that *the Word who was God, the Word who is God*, took on our flesh with all its weakness in the infant of Bethlehem. We need this to be underlined and drawn to our attention again and again, for, all too often, we are tempted to take flight into the spiritual realm.

We live in a world where more and more people are struggling to live their humanity and, as a result, are having recourse to angels – lofty, esoteric creatures. There are those who are more comfortable with angels than they are with human beings, more at home with precious stone, crystals, than with the heart of flesh of the man Jesus in whom we recognise our God Incarnate.

Why is it that angels are preferred to God Incarnate in the person of the man Jesus of Nazareth? Could it be that we feel more comfortable to keep the spiritual and the physical realms separate? It can give people more security (albeit a false security) to have an angel robed in light than to accept the God who in Christ-Jesus dared to enter into our darkness.

Angels are clean and healthy and without blemish. We might ask: what good is that to our fallen, broken, nature in need of healing? We needed a Saviour who would dare to espouse our woundedness so that we might be healed through His wounds; a Saviour ready to enter into our darkness, so that we might be led out by Him to live in the light; a Saviour who experienced our death, so that He might raise us to life.

An angel who hovers over us is a lot less able to help us than a Saviour who dares to descend into hell to pull forth fallen humanity from the pit of destruction.

The Word of life our fallen world stood in need of is the Word who became the human person, Jesus of Nazareth, *who was like us in every way, except sin*.

Christ's *being one like us in every way* makes of Him *our great compassionate High Priest*.

I said at the outset that no one would doubt that our community gives central place to the inspired word of God. I can think of more than one person – especially Evangelical friends who have made this statement in our company and have said that it is this that makes them feel at ease and at home here. But, if I am honest, I sometimes feel a little malaise around their claim that we are men of the Word when I feel that they are reducing the word to an *it* – *it* being the Bible alone – rather than seeing the Word, as the Bible itself sees and presents the Word of God, as a person.

The word of God is to be found not merely in a text. The Word of God is wider than that. It goes far beyond the pages of the Bible. The Bible is of a different order than the Koran. We are not *people of the word/ the book* in the way that those whose religion depends totally upon adherence to and veneration for a text are. Yes, we venerate the written word of God. The Book of the Gospels was enthroned in this ambo for the proclamation of the Prologue of John's gospel this morning and we are considering its content in this homily, but, to come back to and repeat my fundamental point this morning, **more important than any printed words on the pages of this Book is the person of**

## Jesus-Christ.

We must grasp that Jesus Christ, *the Word made flesh*, did not come merely to give us information and /or to address an exhortation to us. The *Word of God* did not come to compile (or lead others to compile after him) sets of rules and regulations, to lay down and confide to paper moral precepts and a multitude of written laws. The *Word of God* came to give us His very self to us and to lead us into a relationship with God through Him: a relationship we are called to enjoy, living our own humanity fully – as Jesus lived His.

Unfortunately, the way some Christians have recourse to the Scriptures – using the writings of the Bible as little more than a set of proof texts to substantiate their claims, especially their strict moralising more than moral codes of conduct – does God's word no favour. It detracts from the central message of *the Word made flesh* – Jesus Christ, the Saviour – which is one of grace and mercy, the liberation of God's people through the blessing of God's favour.

Pope Francis is forever putting us on our guard against keeping the words engraved on tablets of stone to hurl at people in a condemnatory way. He encourages us over and over again to think of the flesh given to the word by the human heart of Jesus.

Before Pope Francis ever came on the scene, Pope Emeritus Benedict in a Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, entitled *Verbum Domini, The Word of God* – the document he presented to the whole Church after the *Synod of Bishops on the Word of God*, wrote: *There is a statement made by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews: 'In many ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he anointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world' (Heb1:1-2).* (I should say that this text from Hebrews is central to the Church's liturgy in these Christmas days- we have sung it practically everyday at Eucharist.)

Pope Emeritus Benedict went on to state: ... *Here the Word finds expression not primarily in discourse, concepts or rules. Here we are set before the very person of Jesus. His unique and singular history is the definitive word which God speaks to humanity. We can see, then, why 'being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter of an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and definitive direction'. ... 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (Jn1:14a). These words are no figure of speech; they point to a lived experience! Saint John, an eyewitness, tells us so: 'We have beheld his glory, glory as the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth' (Jn1:14b) ... Now the word is not simply audible; not only does it have a voice, now the word has a face.... (Verbum Domini 11-12).*

The point to grasp – and I repeat it with monotonous regularity – is that the Word of God is not confined merely to the pages of a book. Indeed, St John tells us at one point that *not all the books ever written could contain the Word made flesh.*

The Word is not just an idea or an ethical system. Pope Francis says this often enough, but he is not alone in saying it. We have heard how Pope Benedict concurs totally with him on this point! The Word of God is not just a set of teachings. The Word of God is Jesus Christ. For us to really grasp this, we need to be grasped by *the Word made flesh*. We need to meet Jesus Christ in a personal way. We are called to know, by experience, His love at work, active and alive in our lives.

St Thomas Aquinas says: *The Son is the Word, not any sort of word, but one who breathes forth love.* Here he substantiates his claim by referring to Augustine. Thomas goes on: *Hence Augustine says (De Trinitate IX 10): 'The Word we speak of is knowledge with love.'*

It is a loving relationship with God – and that actually means an experience of loving relationships with other people in whom God's Spirit lives – that makes an encounter with Christ-Jesus real. God is not to be met in words alone – even should those words be the most wonderful words of the Sacred Scriptures, the most savant analyses of the texts of the Bible, or the finest prose of well-crafted speculative theology.

The Apostle John states the whole mystery of God ever so concisely when he writes: *God is love*. This means that God is met above and before all else in the experience of love: and that, of course, includes our experiences of human love. St John goes on to say: *we cannot claim that we love the God we do not see if we do not love people whom we can see*.

Love is what God's creation is all about, it is what is revealed in Christ's incarnation and in the mystery of our redemption, through His saving death and life-restoring resurrection.

The greatest light on human love that history has ever known comes from God's self-revelation in Jesus-Christ. Jesus shows us that human love has its source in God. I believe that we can say as a follow on to that statement that since love comes from God, the experience of love is also what leads to Him. If we ask with Mother Julian of Norwich, what was God's meaning in creating and redeeming the world, we can only answer with her: *Love was His meaning*.

Made in God's image and likeness, we resemble God in our capacity to love. We were made by God to be loved and to love. In the words of the late Cardinal Daly: *The human being needs love in order to be human. We need to be loved and to love in order to be fully human*.

This leads me to say that a person who has not yet experienced some form of love from another person and has not yet engaged him or her self to love other persons, in some way, has not yet fully realised their vocation which is to be *like God*.

Let us ask for the grace to well and truly *know God*, that is to say to well and truly know love in our lives. To *know* God is not just to have knowledge about Him, it is to be transformed by Him. To know the Lord is to be transformed by our encounter with the One whom we know to be love in Himself. To know God is to be transformed into someone who resembles Him more: that is to say, has become a more loving person.

A woman who was given great insight into the transforming power of God's love is St Catherine of Siena.

It seems appropriate to share with you these insights given to her and relayed to us in her *Dialogues*. Therein we read: *Love changes to one loved into the one who loves*. (Dial. 60) *One who knows more, loves more... Our humanity is called to be conformed to the humanity of the Word, so that we may delight in it*. (cf. Dial 62) Finally, reiterating what the Fathers had already proclaimed Catherine echoes for us this word of life given to her: *God was made man and man was made God*. (Dial.15)

Here we have the whole mystery of God's love revealed in the incarnation: a mystery to celebrate and a mystery to live!

Amen!