

The Nativity of our Lord – Mass during the Day
(Isaiah 52:7-10 / John 1:1-18)
25.12.2016

Words matter.

Just think of how we feel when someone fails to honour their word to us. Just think of how disappointed, hurt and betrayed we feel when someone is untrue to their word in our regard.

Words are meant to communicate.

Within the etymology of the word *communication* we find the idea of *uniting, making one with, being in common ... being in common-union, communion*.

When communication breaks down, or is not true, then, at best, relationships are in peril and, at worst, they just fall apart, because there is no longer any true communion between the parties involved.

At the heart of today's gospel passage we heard that the Word of God took on flesh in Christ-Jesus: *The Word became flesh and lived among us*.

The Word of God and the person of Jesus *coincide*. My choice of word there is important. *To coincide means to correspond in nature or to tally*.

In Christ-Jesus, God, who is always true to His word – no matter how often we are fickle when it comes to our words – expressed Himself in the most wonderful way. He came into this world in the flesh in order to be one with us – in order to *atone* us, to make us *at-one* with Himself.

In the person of Jesus, God has communicated with us in a truly extraordinary manner.

Through His Christ, God has spoken His eternal, ever-abiding word to us.

The word God has communicated to us in and through His Only Begotten Son is a word we all long to hear in our lives, the word that actually makes us live: God's word in Christ is *love!* Yes, in Christ-Jesus, God has said to humanity for all time: *You are loved*.

If the Lord has spoken that message to the whole of humanity, He speaks it most intimately into the secret of each one of our hearts. He invites us to hear Him murmur this reassurance within us as we gather here today to celebrate this wondrous feast.

God speaks His word of love into the deepest recesses of our being with great tenderness, if only we listen to His loving voice. He wants us to hear Him say to us each and every day: *Know that you are loved. I love you*.

These words which God speaks to us are not vain or empty words. They are words which have been en-fleshed; they are words which have been shown in action.

God shows us in Christ-Jesus just how much He loves us.

Already in the mystery of His Incarnation – and further still in the whole of His great Paschal mystery – he Lord shows us what true love is all about. The Lord shows us what it required of His Christ and what it requires of us. We are shown that true love must go to the point of a total self-giving offering. God gave – and continually gives – Himself to us. He offered His life for us. This is what love would have us do: give our lives, make of them a love-offering.

Love is the core message of Christmas.

Christmas is about love which is there with us; love which is there for us; love which is also there, at work, within us.

If we truly open our hearts to God's love, then we will seek to be true to our word; we will seek to be there with and for those to whom we have made this promise – and, indeed, to every person who needs our presence by their side.

It is important for us to recall that all authentic human love that we experience in our lives is nothing other than the very love of God which *has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us*, as Saint Paul wrote in chapter 5 of his Letter to the Romans.

Love's authenticity will be measured by the degree to which it leads the one who love to give of themselves.

The hallmark of true love is the degree to which it leads the lover to be self-given.

True love is oblation love.

Later on in his Letter to the Romans (chapter 12, verse 1). Paul will speak of what love would have us do when he speaks of us being called to make of our lives a total self-offering. The apostle writes: *Offer your very selves as a living sacrifice of praise.*

Forty years ago today – in the course of the Christmas morning Eucharist at the Abbey of Bec – our Brother Eric responded to the mystery we celebrate at Christmas. He responded to God's self-giving love by making an offering of his life in return in an unreserved and total gift to God. In response to God's love, on the day he made monastic Profession, our brother gave his whole being to the Lord.

Words matter.

On Christmas morning forty years ago, Bro. Eric gave his word to God. He said to the Lord: *Here I am. Behold I come to do your will.* Saying this, our brother echoed what the epistle to the Hebrews tells us Christ said when He came into this world.

When Bro. Eric promised obedience to God at his monastic Profession, we could say that he signed a blank cheque.

When he declared to the Lord *Do with me what You will*, little did our brother know just where that would lead him! Since Benedictine monks make a vow of stability, which is ordinarily lived out in their monastery of Profession, Bro. Eric had no idea that his *yes* to God would lead him to live his daily self-offering today, as he has done for so many years now, here in Northern Ireland.

When he was uprooted from Bec for the Christmas of 1997 and when we contacted the OLA Sisters from Monte Oliveto Maggiore on Christmas Eve that year, looking for temporary accommodation in Rostrevor, we were a bit like Mary and Joseph who in their precarious circumstances had to look for somewhere to give birth to Christ.

Clearly, Bro. Eric's being here today is the fruit of an act of love-filled faith, animated by the grace of Holy Hope at work in his heart. It was this which led him to say a total *yes* to God in his monastic Profession and, building upon that, stemming from it, led him to dare to let go of all security in order to do what the Lord would have him do. He did this out of love for the Church and *the faithful ones who dwell in this land*. We could say that the Lord asked him Bro. Eric to espouse the people of this land by living his monastic life here. (The same demand was made of the others brothers who have also left their homeland to come here.)

The words of the psalmist I have just referred to resonate profoundly within me as I think of the mystery of Bro. Eric's response to God's call to give his life in the service of Christian unity, reconciliation and peace here among our people: *You have put into my heart a marvellous love for your faithful ones who live in the land.*

I am sure he has made those words his own in prayer many times over.

This morning it is significant that on the altar of this monastery's church a copy of the original document Bro. Eric signed at his monastic Profession (which according to Benedictine tradition remains in the Abbey of his Profession) has been placed under the altar cloth. Upon that Chart the gifts of bread and wine brought forward for consecration will be placed. This gesture speaks powerfully of what our Christian consecration would have all of us do this morning – not just Bro. Eric, not just the monks, but all of us who are gathered here. It speaks of the call addressed to each one of us to renew the offering of our lives, united with the unique offering of Christ.

The fact that our altar is in Jerusalem stone and was imported from Bethlehem speaks to us this morning in a special way.

Are we not sent in thought in the direction of the Holy Land – where the first disciples walked with Jesus, experienced communion with Him as they listened to His words, were nourished by His teaching and were also given the bread of life to eat and the cup of salvation to drink?

Just as the first disciples saw and believed in the Word made flesh who came to dwell with His people on earth, so we too are called to believe in and see the Word made flesh in our midst, and, to begin with, in our own lives.

More than that, we are called to become words made flesh. We are called to coincide with the words we are given to speak – especially those words whereby we commit ourselves to each other in love.

This morning, as we gather here for Eucharist, we are called to give our word to God afresh. We are called to respond to His God's eternal word to us, by echoing it not only in the words we speak, but in our whole way of being.

Before all else, we are called to hear the Lord whisper into our hearts anew His life-giving words, which bring us such peace, contained in this simple message: *I love you.*

Let us pray: *Lord, know that we want to love You in return for Your great love for us. You can see that we strive to love You, even with all our struggles, faults and flaws; even with our constant failures... We want to love You, despite the many ways in which we so often disappoint, hurt and betray you. Recognise, Lord, our desire to re-commit ourselves to you today. Even with our poverty, weakness and fickleness – we love you.*

It is when we dare to be true to God in prayer and really engage in a dialogue with Him, what is meant to happen at Eucharist happens: we experience blessed communion. We are given to live what Christmas is all about: what the Church Fathers called *the wonderful exchange.*

O admirabile commercium!