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John 1 10-18 Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010 Cathedral

Have you ever been to the cinema and arrived exactly on time for a film advertised for 7.15pm, made yourself comfortable, pleased with yourself that you are neither too late nor too early, only to find that you are watching trailers for half an hour telling you about forthcoming films? If you go regularly to the cinema, they can become overly familiar. One way of enjoying them more is to take time to enjoy their ingenious crafting. Made after the film has been constructed, the designer has a few minutes to make you want to go to see the film: so you will see the funniest parts, or the most exciting chases, or the weirdest, scariest parts. If the trailer is well-constructed, it will not tell you the whole story in case by the time it has concluded, you think you have seen the whole film. Mostly they whet your appetite for more. In a similar way an overture to an opera weaves musical phrases and tunes together to foretell the themes that are yet to come – themes that will recur during the performance.

Here in this first chapter of John, verses 1-18, commonly called the prologue, is a trailer or an overture of an extraordinary and cosmic story that is about to unfold. John weaves words and phrases succinctly together that we will meet again during his Gospel: words such as light, darkness, witness and truth. The Gospel reading set for today was for verses 10-18, but I thought we needed to hear the whole overture to understand how it introduces us to John's Gospel because the two parts are like a double page in a book where the reader needs to read both sides to understand the whole. The first part, verses 1-13, is telling of God's creative expression in the world and the second part, verses 14-18, is concerned with Jesus Christ glorified, that is, crucified. God's involvement with creation and Christ crucified: two central parts to our faith.

The first side of the double page, verses 1-13, telling of the creator God, starts at the 'very beginning' – as that old well-loved film 'The Sound of Music' reminds us – it is a very good place to start. We are taken back to the very beginning, to the foundation of everything. This God, our God, is an expressive communicator – 'the word was God'. Everything around us is God's creative activity. Here is the great poet at work, and creation 'the word', embodied.

The Gospel's author echoes the opening chapter of Genesis, 'In the beginning God created...' and into the created world came light on the first day. The prologue though is talking not about daylight, but about another light that is to come. It is made very clear that this light (a word repeated four times in three verses) was not John the Baptist. Later in the Gospel, there will be no doubt about the subject of the light. Jesus will say in one of the seven 'I am' passages, 'I am the light of the world'. Such light is a new beginning and allows us to become children of God; it shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. John will later talk of Judas – the very opposite of Jesus – as going into the 'night' to betray him. So in the first 13 verses, we have had the motifs of darkness and light woven into the poetry and we have established that God's very being expresses itself in the created world. Maybe the analogy of an overture only partially works because the unique concept of 'the word' is not again encountered in precisely that form in the body of the Gospel.

From verse 14 onwards, we are taken to the second part, or the opposite side of the double page, where we discover that God's creative activity in the world will become focussed in Jesus Christ, who embodies the qualities of grace and truth, the very qualities of the divine self, the 'I am' that is mentioned in the book of Exodus. 'Grace and Truth' are presented as divine glory, and that introduces a key theme of the Gospel that the moment of crucifixion is God made visible, glory, we might say, in all its glory.

John begins the second part of his poetic trailer with 'the Word became flesh'. No manger or stable for John, no shepherds or wise men, simply the poetry of 'the Word became flesh'. This phrase is now very familiar to us, but at the time there would have been many listeners who would have been outraged. Today such words would spark a series of letters to the newspaper in the style of 'disgusted from Tunbridge Wells'. What would have invoked such displeasure? The thought that God could become embodied. Many people today reject Christianity because they cannot conceive of a God who would take on human form and then 'dwell among us'. For us, God in human form, ate, slept, smiled, cried – all the things we do as we live our short lives. There is a beautiful carol which was sung at one of the several school carol services here over Christmas called 'Mary, did you know?' where the last line encapsulates the incarnation in the words 'Mary, did you know the sleeping child you're holding is the great I am?'

As soon as we have heard the ‘word has been made flesh’, we hear of the crucifixion: John says ‘we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son’. The word ‘glory’ for John is associated with the crucifixion. In ‘Alice in Wonderland’, Humpty Dumpty misuses the word glory by saying in a seemingly nonsensical way to Alice, ‘There’s glory for you’. When asked by Alice what he means, he explains that it means ‘there’s a good knock-down argument for you’. Perhaps he should have read John’s Gospel to understand a fully revealing way of using the word ‘glory’. For John, when Jesus is crucified, he is being glorified.

At the end of verse 14 we hear that the father’s only son will be full of grace and truth. Moses gave the law but it will be Jesus who brings grace and truth.

Grace – we use the word ‘grace’ in daily living as a prayer said before a meal but ‘grace’ is about God’s unmerited mercy in sending his only son, to die on a cross so that we may not perish but have eternal life. One of the many definitions of grace include ‘the divine influence upon the heart, and its reflection in life’. Grace is given by God to us to develop characteristics which are in harmony with God. I would urge you to look around you – you will find many people who come here who are indeed people of ‘grace’ – people who have no interest in themselves, people who are developing God’s characteristics within them, people who are here because they want to be with God and do as God requires, people who are showing Christ’s grace in this place and outside by their love and actions.

Grace and Truth. The son of God says John, is also full of truth. Jesus becomes the exemplar for grace and truth. Later Pilate will pick up the motif when he looks Jesus in the face at the trial and asks, ‘What is truth?’ . Pilate, like so many others fails to see that the answer is standing right in front of him. This is truth at a deeper level than simply telling lies – a truth which throws light into darkness. Truth which is covenant love, the steadfastness of God standing before Pilate.

At the end of this prologue John tells us very plainly ‘No-one has ever seen God’, but it is the only Son who has made him known – if we look at Jesus Christ, then we are looking at God. Jesus’ activities, in particular his signs, disclose the divine self, God the father: a father full of grace and truth.

So the prologue or the trailer in John's Gospel sets the scene for the life-giving ministry of Jesus and the unfolding of God's work through the death of Jesus Christ.

Today, the day after New Year's Day and the spectacular firework displays, we may still have all kept our resolutions, but it is possible that by February we will have forgotten all about them. A deeper concern might be what kind of a spiritual prologue or trailer would you want to be written for your life. What would be the two scenes that would be played to encapsulate your life? The trailer would indicate, not when we went on holiday or sang in a concert, or ate a good meal, it would give intimations of God at work in our life. What would be the themes in our spiritual prologue: how would light, darkness, witness feature? Maybe it would indicate times when God's light shone through us, when God helped us to overcome despair and darkness, maybe times when we started again after a difficult time, a time when we took risks for God, maybe it would tell of times when we were full of God's grace or truth. Such a prologue would give the themes of the story of our own Christian lives - the story we are living now: we are writing the material for such a trailer today.

May we all delight our creator God by living out our lives with grace and truth in response to the 'word made flesh' and to 'Christ glorified'. Amen