

Midnight Communion

24–25th December 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's a dark night, cold and silent,
and you're at home on your own, unable to sleep.
You've given up lying in bed
waiting for sleep to come,
and instead have got up,
put on a dressing gown against the chill,
paced through the lonely house,
made yourself a drink in the empty kitchen,
and – simply so that you can hear something more
than the hum of the fridge
and the wind at the window,
you have turned on the radio.

And the moment you flick the switch,
you hear a familiar voice,
one of those voices you have known since childhood,
one of those voices you would know anywhere,
recognisable from the very first syllables you hear,
speaking over time and distance
as if directly to you
with that intimacy only radio can manage
as if you and the speaker were alone together
as if you were the only one being spoken to –
and, just like that,
though it's just as dark outside, just as cold,
you are no longer alone.

* * *

A moment of recognition like that lies behind
the reading we have just had from John's gospel.
All the people around Jesus –
his parents, the shepherds,
the people who became his disciples,

all of them –

they were, like him, Jewish.

They grew up in the context of synagogue and temple,

prayers and blessings, psalms and stories,

as familiar to them as Christmas carols

and nativity scenes to us.

And thanks to all that, they knew the voice of God;

it was familiar to them, recognisable to them.

They knew it as a voice that spoke in the world around them –

the fish-filled lake, the hills,

the dry streambeds that suddenly flooded,

the thunder, the cycle of rains and crops.

They knew this world

as a world sung into being by the voice of God

a world sustained by God's powerful word.

That voice, the voice of life, was the backing to their daily lives.

They knew this voice that sustained the world, they recognised

it; it was familiar to them.

They knew the same voice of God
as the voice that set the rhythm for their community's life,
calling their community to order –
holding them together,
speaking their laws, their statutes, their commandments,
laying down rules for peaceful and orderly life,
showing them the way that they should go.

They knew this voice that guided their community, they
recognised it; it was familiar to them.

They knew the same voice of God
as the voice crying out in the words of their prophets,
refusing to let injustice lie,
refusing to leave the poor without help,
refusing to ignore the immigrant, the destitute.

They knew God's voice as a voice promising a fairer future,
a voice that spoke passionately in their scriptures
and that had become the voice of their own consciences.

They knew this voice that promised a better world, they
recognised it; it was familiar to them.

They had grown up knowing this voice, God's voice
knowing the word that God's voice spoke.

They knew it like they knew their own breath.

They could recognise it the moment they heard it,
from the very first syllable.

And when they met Jesus

they heard that voice again

they recognised its tones.

There was a bone-deep, heart-deep familiarity to it.

They heard in him

the same voice that they heard in their prophets,

a voice calling out against injustice,

a voice that gripped their consciences.

They heard in him

the same voice that they heard in their laws

and in their histories,

calling them again to be a people,

to welcome their neighbours,

to learn how to live in peace together.

They heard in him
the same voice that they knew from the story of creation,
a voice that remade their world,
a voice that turned their winter back to spring.

Listen, they said – *we know* this voice.

This man –
this Jesus, the one we can see, and touch, and eat with,
this very one here in front of us –
the one born this night, laid in this manger –
this man *is* the voice of God in the flesh.

This man is *the word of God made flesh*.

And we have not been left alone.

* * *

It is a dark night, cold and silent.

It *might* seem as though you have been left alone.

That the world you inhabit is nobody's song
but simply an indifferent stage on which your life plays out
with no audience, and to no purpose.

You might feel that you're not really part of anything
bigger than yourself, or bigger than your immediate family,
not really part of a community, a people,
a story that can make sense of who you are.

You might think that the peace and good will,
the hope and the kindness that we celebrate at Christmas
are like candle-flames that flicker out
almost as soon as they are lit
blown out by the selfishness, the dishonesty,
the hypocrisy and disregard that power everyday life,
too weak to make a difference.

But listen!

In this manger, tonight –
Right here in the midst of the darkness –
you can hear the beginning of something,
a voice speaking in the shape of
one man's eloquent life,
a word made flesh.

The Word made flesh.

And you recognise this voice:

this voice has a bone-deep, heart-deep familiarity to it –

a voice in the darkness,

telling you that you are not alone,

and that the darkness is not all that there is.

The one who made all things,

the one who sang life into being,

the one who knows what life is for,

the one who made *you*,

the one who knows what *your* life's real story is –

that one is speaking to you now,

speaking in the baby in the manger

speaking in the man he will become

speaking through the whole life that he will lead

speaking through his proclamation of the love of God

and the love of neighbour

speaking through the way he will live that love out
all the way to the end,
even though the darkness tries to drown him out,
a word that God will not allow to be silenced by death
a voice that still lives,
a voice that will not go away,
a voice that will never leave you on your own.

Listen!

The Word of God is made flesh tonight
and you are included in the story that this word tells.

Whatever you have done,
whatever you have become,
whatever your hopes and fears,
this word invites you to become part of
the community that it forms,
you can know the peace that it brings,
you can share the life that it makes.

You are the one this word is speaking to
this Christmas night –
as if it were just you and the baby in the manger,
as if it were just you and Jesus,
as if you were the only one addressed
by the word made flesh in him,
telling you that God is with you.

It is a dark night, cold and silent,
but there is a voice speaking to you in the darkness,
and you are not alone,
you are never alone.

The Word is made flesh for you this night.

Amen