

## Christmas 2020

### *In the beginning*

*In the beginning.* How far back do we go? a year, a lifetime, a millennium, the beginning of time? *In the beginning.* These are the first words of John's gospel, and the first words of the Bible in Genesis, 'in the beginning'.

The prologue to John's gospel begins on a cosmic level, not like the birth narratives in Luke's Gospel with which we are so familiar, although even Luke has hints of a bigger picture. In John's gospel we are thrust back to the beginning.

The creation is spoken, sung into existence.

Jan Richardson recalls seeing a French Illuminated manuscript fashioned in the Middle Ages, where the Virgin Mary stands admiring the infant Jesus. Instead of his makeshift manger bed, Jesus is cradled in a book, securely enclosed by the leather strap that holds it shut.'

'And thus', says Richardson, 'has the medieval artist sought to capture one of the core beliefs of the Christian tradition, one that we hear sung in today's reading from the prologue to the Gospel of John: 'the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth'. Christ the Word, cradled among words. It's an artful depiction that's both terribly literal-minded and also deeply imaginative..'

'Words are one of the main ways I come to know the world, and myself within it, and the one who created it.'

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'With these words, *in the beginning*, John means for his hearers to recall the book of Genesis, the book of beginnings. He intends to conjure in his hearers' minds the God who sang into the chaos and, word by word, articulated creation. This God who worded the world into being, John tells us, is the very Word who took flesh and came to walk among us.

And this Word was life.

And this Word was light.

And the darkness did not overcome it.

And what more shall we say on this Christmas eve/day?

Perhaps just this: that for John, the Book of Beginnings was still being written, a story both ancient and new, a sacred text that God was yet inscribing among God's people. And is inscribing still. We who

celebrate the birth of Christ are called also to be his body, and to participate in the ongoing process of the Word becoming flesh in this world. In us, Christ continues to be born. In this and every season.’<sup>1</sup>

So in this time, twelve months after the huge Gippsland bushfires, in this time, when COVID-19 is still rampant in the world, in this time when we celebrate Christmas from a distance, and some of us can't see our families, what does it all mean? What is the Word that we hear, the Word that we speak?

If you listen to the news, it is mostly doom and gloom, and disaster, but if we look deeper we can see the faces of kindness and generosity and love. People leave little notes for people to find on their walks, people drop off food, people ring up.

The meaning for me, the meaning of Christmas, the Word made flesh, is always love. The Word from the beginning, this song of creation, is love, God with us in the darkness and in the light, in the isolation, and the grief and sadness, in the delight at new birth. And we have seen his glory, glory as of the fathers only Son, full of grace and truth.

*This word made flesh* has always been there from the beginning, Sophia, wisdom, the playmate of God, and will always be there. For me that is the hope, that is the meaning, God with us.

In the beginning was the Word.

C.S. Lewis' account of Aslan's creation of Narnia in 'The Magician's Nephew' is reminiscent of this Prologue to John. In it, Aslan, the Christ-figure Lion, sings the world into being:

'In the darkness, something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing. It was very far away and Digory found it hard to decide from what direction it was coming. Sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes he almost thought it was coming out of the earth beneath them. Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself. There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was, beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise he had ever heard. It was so beautiful he could hardly bear it . . . Then two wonders happened at the same moment. One was that the voice was suddenly joined by

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<sup>1</sup> <http://adventdoor.com/2007/12/25/door-25-the-book-of-beginnings/>

other voices; more voices than you could possibly count. They were in harmony with it, but far higher up the scale; cold, tingling, silvery voices. The second wonder was that the blackness overhead, all at once, was blazing with stars. They didn't come out gently one by one as on a summer evening. One moment there had been nothing but darkness; next moment a thousand, thousand points of light leaped out . . . If you had seen and heard it, as Digory did, you would have felt quite certain that it was the First Voice, the deep one, which had made them appear and made them sing.'<sup>2</sup>

We hear the poetry of John's gospel and the poetry of CS Lewis sing to us of something bigger than our small lives, but something that cradles and encapsulates all of who we are. We focus on the Word made flesh, this tiny vulnerable babe that depends on us for life itself.

So what is the meaning of Christmas, with its gift giving, it's celebration, it's worship? What is the take-home message? Breathe it in, this mystery, this song, this Word, this Word made flesh, this Love. The cosmos is focused on the child, a very human child, a child of God, God's gift to us.

'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth'.

Bishop Richard began his sermon for the recording this week, 'You're muted!' Turn on your camera. The microphone button is on the bottom left of your screen. You're muted.. You can't be heard! If you've done any zooming at all this year, you'll be very familiar with this retort. It happens all the time in our online evening prayer group.

Our challenge is to unmute, to unblock our ears our voices, to listen to the words, the Word who can speak very softly and is hardly heard at all, .. to listen, then to speak and to act..

Listen to the Narnia story again:

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: Collier), pp. 98-99.

<http://www.wikipreacher.org/home/bible-passages/new-testament/-4-john/john-chapters-01-9/john-1-1-14/aslan-s-creation-of-narnia>

‘With each step the singing lion took with its large paws trees and mountains and animals and rivers and flowers and all sorts of lovely things were bursting forth into existence, until finally, all was created. Narnia had been created by the voice of the lion. Aslan stood in the centre of a circle created by the all the animals he had just made, and he said to them, “Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak.”<sup>3</sup>

Today, we begin again, we celebrate the song, the Word made flesh, sounding at the heart of creation, God with us! And we Love. Think. Speak. Be.  
Now, let us worship.  
*Susanna*

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis, C.S. The Chronicles of Narnia. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2001, page 70.