

HOW GOOD IS YOUR RECEPTION?

Jeremiah 31. 7-14

Ephesians 1. 3-14

John 1. 10-18

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every year during Advent and at Christmas, the Lectionary provides us with a number of biblical passages that are designed to point us to the Incarnation of Christ. For those of you who were at St Stephen's for our celebration of Midnight Mass, you will remember that we had the privilege of hearing the first fourteen verses of the first chapter of St John's gospel: and now, one week later, we have some of them again, but with four extra verses added on.

Before I speak about the significance of these four verses, I would like share a few thoughts about the Incarnation and what it means. Yes, to quote the words of our text, the Incarnation means that 'the Word became flesh and lived among us'; God came to earth in the form a tiny baby, and grew up to be an adult; living, serving and ministering among us. Yet this morning, I would like us to take note of two things when we speak of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The first thing is that the Incarnation proved that God wanted to become human; and when I say human, I mean *really human*. We all know people who make distinctions as they look at their fellow human beings, calling some of them godly and others godless; calling some of them are good and some of them evil; saying that some are sophisticated, but that others are common.

Not God. God loves all human beings without distinction, be they good or bad; and in order to accomplish the Incarnation, here God is, taking on humanity in bodily fashion. He showed his love of human beings by entering into their lives as a human

being; and by bodily taking *upon himself and bearing* the nature, essence, guilt and suffering of human beings. Our God took on humanity *as it is*.

The second thing that we may notice when we speak of the Incarnation of Christ is that when God became human, we human beings were given hope. In Christ, the form of human beings before God was created anew; that is, we human beings were given the opportunity to be changed and to be transformed. As we come to Christ, we are not transformed into something that is foreign to us, nor do we become God. But Christ, when he took human form, provides us with a new model, or a template if you like. He starts by redeeming us in our humanity, just as we are; and as he redeems us, he gives us the possibility to be transformed as human beings and to become more like him and to be the human beings we were truly meant to be.

These facts about the Incarnation are good news indeed. Yet when our Lord came to earth, St John tells us that ‘the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him’ (1. 10, 11). Jesus got a very poor reception on earth. Time and time again, he was ignored and passed by; he was scorned and rejected. People were too busy for him, and they did not have time for him. There was no room for him, not only at the inn, but in their hearts.

Given the immensity of the Incarnation of Christ, and (as we have just seen) all that it means for us and for humanity, we would do well to ask ourselves, what type of reception *have I given* to our Lord this Christmas season?

If you travel to France and find yourself way out in the country, you may find to your dismay that you are in an area where there is very poor reception for mobile telephones. The signal cannot get to your phone, and this can happen for a number of reasons. Probably, you are too far away from the transmitter or network. Or perhaps you find that if you go outside, or to another place, you suddenly have good

reception and can make a telephone call or surf on the Internet. We are forced to be attentive, aren't we, if we want to establish good telephone contact in rural areas, wherever they may be.

Similarly, during Christmastide you and I are invited to take steps to ensure that our reception of Christ, the Word made flesh, is everything that it should be. Perhaps even now we can think of things, of people or of circumstances that have prevented us from receiving him as we ought to do in our hearts. The Christmas season – the season that heralds the Incarnation – is a time when we should take practical steps to *fine-tune* our reception of Jesus Christ. What might those practical steps be? As we take them, we can be encouraged: we remember that 'to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God' (1. 12).

But there is more. The last four verses of our gospel text provide us with new information about the extraordinary benefits of the Incarnation: 'from his fulness we have all received, grace upon grace. The Law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (1. 16, 17).

When we read this last sentence too quickly, we forget that St John is actually talking about *two gifts* that have come to us sequentially from God. The first gift (and this may surprise us) was the Law. The commandments and all of the Law were initially given to Moses and God's people for a gracious reason: so that they could follow his precepts and remain in a privileged relationship and fellowship with him.

But when God's people did not follow his Law, a second gift came, and that was Jesus Christ. It was St Augustine who wrote that the Incarnation of our Lord was a 'masterpiece of divine grace'; and indeed it is. As we know, our Lord did not come to replace the Law; rather, he came to fulfil it. And because Christ fulfilled the Law

to the letter, the gift of the Law now can be said to have been surpassed and made perfect in the Incarnation.

Through Christ's perfect life and his offering of himself to us on the Cross, the Word made flesh has given us the freedom to become God's children by our trust in him, and then to have a fuller and fuller share in God's own joy. 'From his fulness we all have received, grace upon grace.' When the Law was initially given to God's people, the divine intention was that they would discover what it was to truly *live*, as they kept his commandments. Since the coming of Jesus Christ and the Incarnation, we are given a second chance to see what 'living' is all about. As we gratefully receive the grace of God in our hearts, we begin to discover that our lives start to change. Our life as Christians no longer rests on commands or laws alone, but on the fact that God has given us something of his own life. We live from him and in him.

What does this mean practically? It means that you and I, who remain sinful people, can realise that the love of God offered to us through the Incarnation is for us *personally*; it is for *you* and for *me*. And as we receive that love, we begin to joyfully realise that life is not all about following the Law, or about following a set of rules (even though they are not bad in and of themselves); *life* is all about receiving this gracious love of God and allowing it to fill us and to move us. When we allow the love of God to fill us and to move us, it become rather contagious! We find that we can't help ourselves; we begin to want to share and pour out that God-like love that makes other people *live*.

During my life, I have had the privilege of meeting a number of people who were very hostile to God and to any expression of Christianity; but who, when they encountered the love of God as it was demonstrated to them in the lives and actions of others, came to realise that God is real. They came to see that his love is real. And his love touched their lives and changed them.

One prominent theologian has said that living a good life – or living a moral life – is not about right and wrong. Rather, it's about reality and unreality: we experience 'reality' when we live in Christ, and we experience 'unreality' when we live for ourselves. Being 'good' is living in Christ, who is the truth; being 'good' is living a real life, a life that is in touch with the Word made flesh and that releases the love of God in the world.

The 'goodness' of the Christian is never a matter of achieving a standard, or scoring high marks on a test. It is letting the gracious love of God knock us sideways, and turn our ordinary habits and reflexes upside-down, so that the love of God comes through. And this love of God that comes through is yet another gift to others.

I wonder, what *gifts* are you and I going to give to the world this year?

Amen.