

‘WHAT IS REAL?’

Isaiah 52. 7-10

Hebrews 1. 1-4

John 1. 1-14

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

I am sure that all of you have heard of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the famous children’s book that was written by Margery Williams in 1922. It has been re-published many times since then, and I thought that I would begin my talk this morning with a quote from it which speaks to both younger and older people:

“‘What is REAL?’” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made”, said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.” “Does it hurt” asked the Rabbit?”

We live in an age when we are surrounded by so much that is not real. The younger generations (and some of the older generation, to tell the truth) now live in a virtual world called Facebook; or Twitter; or WhatsApp; or Instagram. For those of you who are interested, there’s a website called ‘A Second Life’ which allows you to totally immerse yourself in a life that is completely different to the one that you are living. Or think just a moment about our television screens: they also invite us to escape reality, as we are constantly bombarded with adverts for the latest car, financing for our dream house or the most amazing diet that will work. Just try us, we are told; and you will experience a reality that is so much better than what you now have.

This Christmas morning, I think that the Rabbit's question is more pertinent than ever before. What is real?

You and I may have a number of answers to that question. Today, on the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord, the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews gives his take on reality, that reality that is found in Jesus. He writes, 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these days he has spoken to us by a Son...He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.'

God is not a set of ideas or good intentions; God is not a moral and ethical code; God is not even a way of life. Those are all laudable, and make for good people and the bettering of society; but they are not at the heart of what we believe about God. Our God is the Word made flesh – the ideas, the good intentions, the moral and ethical code and the way of life personified in Christ. In our Lord, God takes human form and *changes the world* by his very presence in it.

Sadly, many of us live two-dimensional lives like the comic book characters that we knew when we were young. Those comic book characters could do amazing things; but they were never *real* because they were two-dimensional. When you and I discover the reality of God and the qualitative change that this discovery brings to our lives, values and stories, this discovery *makes us real*; it makes us three-dimensional human beings.

To continue the quote from *The Velveteen Rabbit*:

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit. “Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” (Rabbit) asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once”, said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time” said the Skin Horse. “Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

The message of Christmas is to discover two realities. The first is to discover the reality of God incarnate, the Word made flesh, the Christ child who has come to us and who is the Saviour of the world.

The second is to discover the reality of ourselves in relationship with a God who has been reaching out to us since the first moment of our existence, reaching out and inviting us to make a choice for change that begins with a decision to be *real*.

When you and I decide to be *real* (as God intended), we are no longer forced to live a fantasy life bolstered by false promises of those around us: ‘You can be great!’ ‘You can be rich!’ ‘You can be beautiful!’ ‘You can be successful!’ The truth is that God loves us and cherishes us for who we are and not what we think we ought to be.

And today, you and I can decide to welcome the divine reality that is offered to us as a supreme gift this morning: Emmanuel, God with us, the King of kings who chooses not only to take on human flesh and to die for us, but to then lead us into a whole new reality, one that far surpasses what we thought was possible.

Why? Because (as Skin Horse rightly said), as we open ourselves up to the love of God offered generously to us, we become really *real*, and that process of ‘becoming’

continues. It goes on and on; and it leads us deeper into God, and deeper into what he has planned for us.

This Christmas morning, let us remind ourselves that we have embarked on a journey. When God the Father sent his Son to the world in the form of a little baby, he already had *all of us* in mind. He already had purposes in mind for each one of us, purposes that included our coming to Christ, discovering his reality, and then seeing ourselves become more *real* than we could ever have imagined.

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven.’ Thanks to him, you and I are really real.

Amen.