

Christmas Day Waddington 2015

John 1:1-18

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴And 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.

So, Christmas Day is finally here and I hope it lives up to the anticipation for all of you! Sometimes the dark days of Advent seem to close in, and I know that I can feel at times as though we're never going to get to Christmas. It's probably not surprising that well before Jesus' birth people used to find a good reason to celebrate at around the winter solstice, as the shortest day began at last to give way to the returning of the light. I recently read a blog post by a pagan author who was most put out by the way that Christianity annexed the pagan midwinter holiday and renamed it Christmas. He complained about the Christian attempts to put Christ at the heart of the celebration: I could see his point.

Although we celebrate Jesus' birth on the 25th December, there's little hard evidence for the more romantic attributions of Jesus being born in the Bleak midwinter. However, it's certainly a time of year that needs enlivening in the way that Christmas celebrations do. This was what Christianity in its early days did best, it came alongside people where they were and helped them to deepen and develop their understanding of God. It took the good things of the pagan tradition, the coming of the light, and the drawing together of the community in celebration. And it encouraged those communities to see the difference that this third person of the Trinity, the Christ child, God incarnate could make to their lives. So Christian churches in this country were built on pagan sites. Pagan holidays were used to celebrate Christian events, there was a flexibility to them, differences in the way the holiday was celebrated, nothing set. So maybe there is no surprise in the fact that our increasingly materialistic world has made inroads into ensuring that Christmas is more about the secular aspects, the buying and selling, than about the sacred and eternal.

But Christianity is reinterpreted to each generation, and will continue to develop, and overlay this secular side of Christmas, to bring new aspects of social care and love to rebalance the materialistic slant. And anyway, at some point the tinsel will come down, and we will return to our more normal existence. But we live then with the encouragement of John's great unfolding of the incarnation which we heard at the beginning of the gospel reading: ¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" This is what can sustain us through the dark days of February, and the darker days that can occur in everyone's life. This knowledge that the light will come, that the darkness will never have the last word, and we too will be offered an opportunity to come alongside people where they are and to encourage them to deepen and develop their understanding of God