

Second Sunday after Christmas 3 January 2016

[Christmas 2 C January 3 2016](#) Textweek

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Psalm 147:12-20

Ephesians 1: 3-14

John 1;1-18

What a timely gospel reading for today, its opening "*In the beginning*" gives us an orientation, but immediately we might wonder does "*In the beginning*" point us toward the past, the beginning of life, of creation; or does it point us toward the future "*In the beginning*" of 2016?

When we sit at the start of a new year what is the key we hit first, 'delete' (the past), 'enter' (the future) or do we press 'escape' to restart the system and continue where we left off?

The writer of John's gospel most probably did not have a 'new year' in mind and so we'll need to look more broadly to see what John's gospel might hold for us in terms of a more general understanding and appreciate of life.

Today's text is the opening of John's gospel, and so in some sense it parallels the nativity stories that form the opening of Matthew's and Luke's gospel; Mark chooses the baptism of Jesus for his opening text and all of them in one way or another are introductions to overall gospel, the overall telling of the revelation of Christ.

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

This is perhaps a more adult, or more theologically mature, nativity narrative, and its opening three words would readily be understood by the early listeners as a reference to the creation narrative in Genesis which 'begins'

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light."

John has seen revealed in, and through, Jesus that "*The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*"

And that really does take both Jesus and ourselves into a new order of understanding; John's gospel is an enlightened appreciation of humanity that does not place the manger at the beginning but rather places the 'word', the very essence of life as the source of our being.

Let's leave that to soak in for a moment and take a look at the ceiling of the Sistine chapel, as I did on the internet.

We are probably all familiar with one of the central frescos, painted by Michelangelo between 1508 and 1512 and central to the ceiling decoration are nine scenes from the Book of Genesis of which *The Creation of Adam* is the best known, having an iconic standing equalled only by Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, the hands of God and Adam being reproduced in countless imitations.

The almost touching of the two fingers, the right hand of God and the left hand of Adam, are well known, as well known as the manger in the stable perhaps; but what is going on with the left hand of God?

God's left arm is around a female figure, and God's left hand is touching a child.

And we can only wonder at the theological iconography that Michelangelo brought to this scene. Was it Mary and the infant Jesus embraced by God's left arm, or was the female figure Eve, waiting her turn to be created; Eve, whose name means *life*, and who will be the mother of all humanity in the genesis tradition?

A third option is that the female figure is Wisdom, the character of the logos, the word of John's gospel; and yet another possibility is that the female figure is the Holy Spirit (*ruach*, a feminine noun, in the Hebrew).

In painting the creation of Adam, Michelangelo has left us with a fresco an image that perhaps harmonises the nativity, the creation and the trinity; it is perhaps also a painting pictorially illustrates the enlightened "*In the beginning*" of John's gospel.

John's gospel offers us a very different appreciation of the Nativity; he departs from the "unto us is born a Son" [*Puer nobis nascitur*] and places the birth of all life in the very act of creation.

The Hebrew tradition was, and is, waiting for a saviour, the Christian tradition adopted the same position, but named the saviour and Christ and now awaits a second coming,

but John, and perhaps Michelangelo saw beyond the confines of that flat earth understanding and realised that our beginning is in the oneness of creation.

Two pages into the sermon, and the impatient question arises in the back of our minds; "so what?"

The text of John's gospel is quite different to the other three gospels, and John's worldview is also different...

What we are offered in today's text is a new understanding of Christmas – and so too a more developed appreciation of who we truly are; *"12 But to all.... he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."*

If we can grasp a new understanding of ourselves, so we also see the world differently. three headlines from last night's news:

1. Islamic militants use Trump speech in recruitment film
2. Taliban suicide bomber hits French restaurant in Kabul
3. Texas, the second-most populous state, joins 44 other states in allowing at least some firearm owners to carry handguns openly in public places.

In our old, traditional, cultural understanding such headlines do set off alarms, and they in turn initiate the 'someone should do something' response; we remain waiting for a saviour..

"12 But to all.... he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."

The almost touch that Michaelangelo painted between humanity and divinity in the creation fresco is brought into an embrace through the words of John's gospel

*And the Word became flesh
From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.
The true light, which enlightens everyone, **is come** into the world.*

Perhaps as we start a new year, we might first contemplate the reality of the world that we will create in 2016.