

## **Full of Grace and Truth**

*Hebrews 1.1–4; John 1.1–18*

a sermon at the Eucharist on Christmas Morning 2006

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If I asked you where in John's Gospel you would find a wedding scene, several of you would know the answer at once. Don't worry; I am not going to use the excuse that this is Christmas Day to turn this august congregation into a glorified Sunday School, though actually Christmas Day of all days is a great time to celebrate childlikeness and some of you may perhaps have been enjoying doing so already. But the obvious wedding in St John is of course in chapter 2, the wedding at Cana in Galilee, where Jesus changes the water into wine. But I want to suggest to you this morning, as a matter of considerable importance for understanding our Christian pilgrimage and mission, that there is a wedding of equal if not greater significance in the famous passage we just heard, the extraordinary Prologue to John's Gospel.

John's Prologue, as again many of you will know, is like the great doorway to a great building. These eighteen verses, so apparently simple yet, like their primary Old Testament background in Genesis 1, so utterly profound, introduce us to the subject-matter of the whole gospel. For many generations and in many traditions they have been read as the Christmas morning gospel, because of their central and earth-shattering announcement: And the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us. That is the mystery which lies at the heart of Christian faith and life, mission and ministry, the mystery at which the other two great monotheistic faiths, Judaism and Islam, completely balk: that the one true and living God should pour out his very self into created flesh, that the playwright should come on stage and take the leading part because nobody else can play it. And that God-in-human-flesh theme isn't a flash in the pan, a one-off experiment which, having riskily been tried in Jesus himself, God quickly gave up. Part of the whole point of John's Gospel is that when the Word made Flesh accomplishes his work of glory, love and passion, he pours out his own Spirit on his followers so that they, too, can become Words-become-Flesh. This, too, is stressed in the Prologue: as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become God's children, born not in the normal way but with a new birth from God. We can watch it happening immediately after the resurrection, when Jesus tells Mary Magdalene to tell the eleven 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father.' Christmas, in other words, isn't supposed to be just a truth about Jesus. It's supposed to be, in utter dependence on Jesus, a truth about us. Christmas isn't a spectator sport. It's an invitation. And, yes, it's a wedding invitation.

So where is the wedding in John's prologue? Back to Sunday School again, this time with a guess-the-text puzzle. I said that Genesis 1 was the primary Old Testament background for John's prologue; but what are the other major Old Testament passages that John is echoing? Hands go up in this imaginary classroom: yes, Proverbs 8, God's wisdom through which the world was created – very good; Isaiah 55, with the Word like

rain and snow coming down from above and accomplishing God's work through the ministry of the Servant: yes, excellent; Ben-Sirach 24 – well, yes, not exactly the Old Testament but very important. But what about Psalm 85?

Think about it with John in mind. 'Grace and Truth are met together; justice and peace have kissed each other. Truth springs up from the ground; and justice looks down from heaven.' And suddenly that little phrase in John's prologue, 'grace and truth', so easy to say that it just slips down almost unnoticed, like the second glass of ginger wine, stands out in three dimensions and demands that we pay attention to it. My friends, Christmas is in one sense all about a birth, but in another sense it is about a wedding: the marriage of grace and truth, which is in fact the marriage of heaven and earth. The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the Father's only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace; for the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. When John repeats something in this way, he wants us to pay it close attention.

It's all too easy, reading a phrase like 'grace and truth', to suppose that these abstract nouns denote two of the many miscellaneous good things which are given to us in Jesus Christ, along (that is) with justice, peace, salvation, wisdom and a host of others. And in a sense that's true. But with Psalm 85 in the background – and I'll say more about that in a moment – a new possibility opens up, which means that among the mysterious envelopes under the Christmas tree we discover an invitation to this wedding.

Psalm 85 is a prayer for restoration, for forgiveness, for the mercy and grace of God to break through the long dark night of Israel's exile and bring about that new life for which God's people ached. It is, in other words, an Advent psalm; and we who have prayed our way through Advent these last four weeks ought to know something of its longing and hope. But then, as the poem turns its corner into the second half – it's not long, it's like a sonnet, you could sit down and read it in two or three minutes, though you'd better take a bit longer to get the best out of it – the Psalmist has a moment of vision, and this is what he sees. First, he sees that God will speak a fresh word, a word of peace to his people, to those who have faith. Second, he sees that God's glory will come once more to dwell in the land – in other words, that the Temple will be restored, and the tabernacling presence of the living God will come to live there in full majesty. And, thirdly, he sees that when this happens it will be like a cosmic wedding, with heaven and earth coming together in a rich and fruitful embrace: grace and truth will meet at last, justice and peace will kiss each other; truth will spring up from the earth, and justice look down from heaven. Psalm 85 is, in other words, a Christmas poem: Advent is over, God's fresh Word is spoken, breathed out, received by those who have faith deep in their hearts, and God's glory, his tabernacling presence, has come to live in our midst. The word became flesh, and dwelt – the word means, 'pitched his tent', or 'tabernacled' – amongst us, and we gazed upon his glory. And in this glory we find the coming together of heaven and earth, of grace and truth.

So what does it mean that grace and truth come together in this way? Both are gifts of God, yet in this Psalm grace is the fresh love of God coming from beyond our world, and

truth is the plant which springs up, strong and tall and resilient, from within our world. As I said, the phrase suddenly becomes three-dimensional. Something is happening before our very eyes, as we gaze upon the baby in the manger, the Word made Flesh, and reflect on what it all means. God's gift of his own very self isn't, as people so often imagine, a kind of alien invasion, an intrusion from outside. It is of course a matter of grace, of (that is) totally undeserved mercy, the free gift of an uncaused and overflowing love – and if you want to see what free and overflowing love looks like and feels like, and which of us doesn't, then read the rest of John's gospel and marvel at Jesus loving his own who were in the world and loving them to the uttermost. But this free grace, coming to us from beyond the world, is precisely coming from the one who created the world in the first place and made it to be a place of truth, of solid reality – the reality about which T. S. Eliot commented sadly that humans can't bear too much of it – so that when grace happens, truth happens. And in the baby in the manger we see them both happening; we see them both married for ever. In the Word made Flesh we gaze upon the glory not just of the living God, coming to us in utter love in the person of this tiny baby, but of God's design for his whole world. As St Paul put it, God's plan from the beginning was to unite, in Christ, all things, things in heaven and things on earth. And part of the point of Christmas is that this marriage of heaven and earth, of grace and truth, has now begun and isn't going to stop until it's complete. Welcome to the wedding.

I hope you don't find this all too abstract. That's always a danger with heavyweight theological terms like 'grace' and 'truth', and part of the point of John's gospel is of course that words become flesh and that you can see what they mean because look – there they are, walking around. And we desperately need them to be walking around right now, in the world and in the church. Let me sum it up like this: our world has tried for far too long to get truth without grace; and the church has been in danger for a long time of offering grace without truth. Only when we put them together can we find the way out of the darkness and into the true Christmas light.

Because it really is dark out there, and alas sometimes in here too. The great revolution of thought which happened in Europe over three centuries ago, associated with Descartes in particular, was the attempt to grasp truth as it were from scratch: by doubting everything, we would see what we could be sure of and build out from there. We would know the facts, and the facts would set us free – free from God, free from any responsibility except to our own self-interest. There's a straight line from Descartes to Dawkins: we can doubt God, but we can't doubt the facts, the empirical evidence. And the results of that arrogant attempt to possess truth are all around us, etched in the horrors of the twentieth century and now already the multiple follies of the twenty-first, as we in the West blunder blindly on, believing firmly that because we know the facts and have the technology we can do what we like with other people's countries, other people's stem cells, other people's crops, other people's money, other people's lives. And meanwhile the worm in the apple has hollowed it out more or less completely: the 'truth' which we thought we knew has been eaten away not just in theology and philosophy but in its heartland of physics, by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and in its deeper heartland of the human being, where Descartes began. We have become a society paranoid about truth: so we make each other fill in more and more forms, and set up more cameras to spy

on each other, to check up on one another because we want the truth, we want an audit trail, we want more and more Enquiries and Judicial Reviews and Investigations, but we can't get at truth because Descartes' experiment has itself made it impossible, has generated a world of suspicion and smear and spin. The project of truth without grace has become one of facts without trust, and has finally run into the buffers in the smashed cities of Iraq, in the Snooping and Sniggering Society, in the tail-eating philosophies of postmodern deconstruction. That is the darkness where we have waited for too long in Advent hope, waited for a fresh word, a living Word, the tabernacling of glory in our midst, and for truth to be called forth to its long-awaited marriage with grace. Only when we receive this world as a gift from the creator can we understand truth; only when we see one another as bearing his image can we relearn trust. My friends, Christmas sets us a cultural and political agenda which we must pray will enable us to shine a bright, searching light into the world where ignorant armies still clash by night.

But if the world has tried to have truth without grace, the church has often been tempted towards grace without truth – as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, 'cheap grace'. God has become a benevolent old softie, ready to tolerate everything, to include everyone, to throw away all those unpleasant old moral standards and say it's all right, do your own thing, if it feels good it must be OK. And once again the results are all around – both in the anti-moralism of the arch-liberals and the anti-authoritarianism of today's new conservatives, who don't realise that they are simply producing an ecclesiological parody of the do-it-yourself morality they so detest. But no: grace and truth must meet together; if it really is grace, it really must produce truth, a rich, deep personal, moral and ecclesial integrity which is deeply true to the created order and to its recreation in Christ, to the deep structures of God's wise and loving ordering of his world and of us human beings. Cheap grace – assuming, in whichever direction, that God is on your side because your agenda seems to urgent, so obviously right, and not troubling to ask the hard questions – is to genuine grace as 'facts' are to 'truth': a late modern parody to be named and shamed and rejected in the name of the Christmas message, of the grace and truth which we find in the baby in the manger.

But if that larger, global picture gives a brief indication of why John's repeated 'grace and truth' matters, and matters urgently, in the wider world and church, we cannot of course ignore its message for our own lives. One of the great truths of spirituality is that you become like what you worship. We beheld his glory, says John: we gazed at it, long and lovingly, with adoration and worship, so that the marriage of grace and truth which we see and know in the Christ-child can be born in us as well, so that we can be people, we can become communities, in whom God's grace generates and sustains a human integrity, a wholeness and holiness of character. And the definition of mission – mission to which we as a Diocese have firmly committed ourselves as a priority – can be restated in exactly the same terms: we are to become people in and through whom God's grace overflows to the world around, producing a new integrity, a new truth and truthfulness, at every level from politics to university study to sexual morality to ecology (where the image of grace from above producing fruitfulness below is especially poignant), and reaching out into human hearts and lives and imaginations with the news that there is such a thing as truth, because there is such a thing as grace, because there is such a person

as Jesus, and because in him we see and know God's living word made living flesh and are summoned to become living words in living flesh ourselves. Grace and truth have met together; justice and peace have kissed each other; truth springs up from the earth, and justice looks down from heaven. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace; for the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Come to him today, taste his grace and truth in bread and wine, and become yourselves wedding guests, feasting at the marriage of heaven and earth.