

# Christmas Eve, The Word

Given by Kathy Roberts at the Midnight Service at All Saints, Bradford  
on Christmas Eve, 2008

## Introduction

*Barack Obama's presidential campaign was, amongst other things, a victory for the almost forgotten art of political rhetoric....* said Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in a recent article.

One might dismiss rhetoric as 'mere words', but for both Jews and Christians, words are not 'mere'. *The Bible tells us, continued Jonathan Sacks, that God created the Universe with words. His first gift to the first human, made in his image was the ability to name the animals and use words to understand the world.* (*The Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2008)

*To the Jew a word was far more than a mere sound; it was something that had independent existence and which actually did things. The spoken word to the Hebrew was fearfully alive...it was a unit of energy charged with power.* (William Barclay 1975:27)

## In the beginning, the Word

It was God's powerful energy which spoke the universe into being. John starts his gospel with *in the beginning, at the root of the universe was...the Word - Logos - the Rational Principle which gives unity and significance to all existing things* (William Temple 1947:3)

Stephen Hawking wrote in his book *A Brief History of Time*, (Bantam 1988:10) *that the eventual goal of science is to provide a single theory that describes the whole universe.*

From the Christian perspective, the theory, the Word, is a person, Jesus Christ.

*Through Jesus **all** things were made.*

*Love's instinct is to create; so out of the unique communion of love between 'God' and the 'Word' (or between the Father and the Son) the universe sprang into existence* (Bruce Milne, 1993:37)

And ...

## The Word became flesh

We are so familiar with those words that they can easily wash over us, without any sense of wonder or surprise.

We - rightly - associate them with the events in Bethlehem where, in somewhat squalid conditions the Eternal God whom no one had ever seen became visible – he became flesh and lived, pitched his tent, as it were, amongst us.

*Our God contracted to a span,  
incomprehensibly made man,*

as Wesley's wonderful words put it.

*There was a Scottish farmer who did not believe the Christmas story. The idea that God would become a man was absurd. His wife, however, was a believer and raised their children in her faith. The farmer sometimes gave her a hard time, mocking her belief in the incarnation of God in the baby of Bethlehem:*

*'It's all nonsense' he said. 'Why would God lower himself to become a human like us? It's such a ridiculous story.'*

*One snowy Sunday evening his wife took the children to church while the farmer relaxed at home. After they had left, the weather deteriorated into a blinding snowstorm.*

*Then he heard a loud thump against the window. Then another thump! He ventured outside to see what was happening. There in the field was the strangest sight: a flock of geese! They had been migrating south but had become disorientated by the storm. They were stranded on his farm, unable to fly or to see their way.*

*The farmer wanted to help them and realised his barn would give them shelter for the night. He opened the barn doors and stood back, hoping they would make their way in.*

*But they didn't realise it would be better for them. So he tried to shoo the geese in, but they ran in all directions.*

*Perplexed, he got some bread and made a trail to the barn door. But still they didn't catch on. Nothing he could do would get them into the warmth and shelter of the barn.*

*Feeling totally frustrated, he exclaimed, 'Why don't they follow me? Can't they see this is the only place where they can survive the storm? How **can** I get them to follow me?'*

*He thought for a moment, then realised that they would not follow a human.*

*He said to himself, 'How then can I possibly save them? The only way would be for me to become a goose. If I could be like one of them, then I could save them. They would follow me and I would lead them to safety.'*

*At that moment he stopped and realised what he had said. The words reverberated in his head. 'If only I could become like one of them, then I could save them.'*

*The penny dropped. He suddenly understood God's heart for humankind. He fell on his knees and worshipped him! (John and Stibbe 2005:35, adapted)*

## **Hear the Word to you**

Where are you in relation to the story of Christmas?

God speaks to us through his Word made flesh, his son born in the loneliness of an unknown stable, in the darkness of night.

All of us too have known times of darkness that frighten and intimidate us:

- in our physical lives when illness is close at hand,
- in our emotional lives when we are worried, confused, fearful, in grief, feel guilty or hopeless
- when we live with violence or addiction - or both.
- in our social lives when relationships fail, and solitude becomes loneliness

- when we cannot make meaningful connections with other human beings.
- in our spiritual lives,
  - when we experience the chasm that separates us from God,
  - when we know a separation from God, from other people, and from ourselves;
  - when prayer seems an empty exercise and worship a performance offered to an absent audience.

## Conclusion

On this night of the year, his voice speaks to us, piercing the silence:

*'I know the cares and the anxious thoughts of your hearts,  
I know the hard times you often give yourselves.  
I know the hopes and ambitions that you have for yourselves and for others.  
I know your doubts, too – even while you express your belief.*

*On this night I want to find a way of saying to you:*

*You are deeply, deeply loved,  
just as you are,  
forgiven, loved and challenged to be  
the very best you can be.  
So I'm speaking to you in the only way I know how – from a stable,  
in a child born into poverty,  
soon to grow into maturity,  
born to show you in a human life,  
the love of God.'*  
(John Harvey)

Do you hear his voice speaking to you, tonight?

## References

*Candles and Conifers*, Wild Goose Publications

Bruce Milne, *The Message of John* IVP, 1993

J. John and M Stibbe, *A Bundle of Laughs* Monarch, 2005

William Temple, *Readings in St John's Gospel*, Macmillan, 1947