

## Second Sunday of Christmas

A couple of years ago the Catholic Church in England and Wales made the decision to restore the feast of the Epiphany to its traditional date of 6 January (except if it falls on a Saturday or a Monday). One of the consequences of this decision is that we will again use the Mass of the Second Sunday of Christmastide and so we will again hear the Prologue to the Gospel according to John (John 1:1-14). Although these verses speak nothing of Mary, Joseph, angels, shepherds, wise men, and even the baby Jesus, they are very much part of the Christmas tradition of the church, and it is good to hear them proclaimed once more at Mass.

Why did the evangelist choose to begin his gospel in this way rather than with the conventional nativity story? We are fortunate to be able to hear these words alongside the nativity accounts given in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, we don't know and we can only speculate as to whether the people who first heard and read the Gospel according to John would have been familiar with the other material too.

Both Matthew and Luke use their nativity accounts to express something about the identity of Jesus. In Matthew he is 'Emmanuel, a name which means God is with us' (Matthew 1:23), he is 'the king of the Jews' (Matthew 2:2), he is a new Moses rescued from Egypt (Matthew 2:15). For Luke he is a 'successor to the throne of David' (Luke 1:32) and he is 'Saviour and Lord' (Luke 2:11). John doesn't deny or contradict any of these things, but he goes further and deeper, speaking of Jesus' origins in the very beginning, 'the Word', 'the true light', 'through him all things came to be'. We will shortly affirm these truths when we recite the Creed, and we also repeat them every time we sing 'O come all ye faithful' if we make it as far as the final verse.

I have already mentioned that Matthew and Luke draw on the Old Testament in presenting the birth of Jesus. John does likewise and our First Reading (Ecclesiasticus 24:1-2.8-12) speaks of Wisdom 'pitching her tent in Jacob' (Ecclesiasticus 24:8). When we hear the familiar words 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14) a more literal translation of the Greek would say and *pitched his tent among us*. In Jesus God has 'pitched his tent among us' he is truly in our midst, entering into our world so that we can encounter and accept him, and so see and know his glory.

For many people today the traditional nativity story is a simple 'feel good' story about a baby born in difficult circumstances and yet welcomed into the world by the love both of parents and of strangers. In that sense it is a universal story that is repeated many times over and it is perhaps being repeated again in the strange circumstances in which we find ourselves in this year. However as Christians we would want to insist that the story is important and unique because of who the baby is. The child that is born in Bethlehem is 'Emmanuel, King, Lord, and Saviour', indeed he is 'the Word made flesh who has pitched his tent among us'. It is by accepting him into our lives that our lives can be transformed and we can see and share in his glory. That is surely the best Christmas present of all.

For video version see: <https://youtu.be/ZEOINwKnntM>