Midnight Mass John 1

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

‘Once upon a time, words began to vanish from the language of children. They disappeared so quietly that at first almost no one noticed – fading away like water on stone. The words were those that children used to name the natural world around them: acorn, adder, bluebell, bramble, conker – gone! Fern, heather, kingfisher, otter, raven, willow, wren… all of them gone! The words were becoming lost: no longer vivid in children’s voices, no longer alive in their stories’. Those are not my words – they are the words of two learned people in a book called, quite simply The Lost Words.

Way back in 2015, a group of writers sent a letter to one of the major publishers in this country in which they recognized the need to make room in dictionaries for words like blog and vlog and chatroom, but they also expressed sadness that words relating to the natural world – such as the ones I quoted just now – are disappearing from children’s vocabularies.

Someone told me only the other day that the name Emmanuel happens in the Bible only twice. I haven’t actually read the whole thing to check, but I sort of think he might be right. And like my informant, publishers keep a close track of how often every word in our language is used in books and newspapers.

And just like conker and heather and fern and willow, other words are also disappearing from the language we use regularly. Words like ‘grace’, ‘mercy’, ‘wisdom’, ‘faith’, sacrifice’, ‘honesty’, ‘truth’ and ‘goodness’ – have all declined in use over the course of the twentieth century.

If children are losing the vocabulary to describe the world around them, the rest of us seem to be losing sight of the kind of language that helps us to articulate the depth and range of what it means to be human. You might call them spiritual, special, churchy words, but actually, it is the capacity for faith and an inner life that makes us human. In a world of ‘fake news’ and Instagram picture communication, our language has become banal and very basic, even brutal.

In a world where political commentators describe migrants as ‘vermin’, where the president of the United States complained about the way in which illegal immigrants ‘pour in and infest our country’, where in Britain we tolerate the homelessness of 320,000 people, almost 600 of whom have died on our streets in the past year, the humanity of every one of us is diminished.

‘In the beginning was the Word, (capital W) and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’. With these majestic, awesome, poetic, mysterious words, St John unfolds the mystery of the incarnation.

And as John unfolds the mystery of the Incarnation, he tells us that ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’.

The story of the nativity tells us that God comes among us, alongside us, and beside us – in our lives as they are. This was not some sanitized stable, but messy and dirty and noisy, just as most of our lives are. But this is the mystery of the incarnation, of God with us, Emmanuel. And it is by means of our very humanity that we encounter the mystery of the living God. It is flesh and blood that reveal to us - open up to us - the mystery of the eternal Word. Our humanity is significant. It means something.

In the story of the nativity, we learn that God is with us among teenage parents, and homeless people looking for a bed for the night. God is with us in the squalor of a stable, and in the uncertainty and fear of uneducated shepherds. God is with us in the refugee and the immigrant, the addict and the person with dementia. This is where the mystery of God’s unconditional love is revealed to us. This is where God’s presence is felt and known - in the frailty and vulnerability of our humanity.

And it is this insight which sometimes leaves us lost for words, short of vocabulary. How can we even begin to find the words to describe the beauty, the joy and the sheer wonder of a new-born child? How can we begin to find the words to describe the mystery and intricacy of being human? How can we find the words to respond well to so many of the dehumanizing forces which characterize what is going on in the world, particularly, but not exclusively, among politicians?

‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us’. My prayer for this Christmas and on into the coming year is that we might all rediscover the words to speak up for the marginalized and vulnerable in our society. Let us pray that we learn to rejoice in every individual human being. Because that is the hope brought to us by the ‘Word made flesh’. That is what, ultimately, will save us from ourselves and from each other.

When we recover the ability to see the image and face of God in every human being we encounter, then we will find the words to bear witness to the message of the angels, ‘Peace on earth, goodwill towards all people’.

For this word, the Word made flesh, will never be lost. Thanks be to God for that.

**Amen**