

'Tabernacled amongst us'

Ecc 24: *the Wisdom of God has dwelt in the Chosen People*
Eph 1: *He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus*
Jn 1: *The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us*

Last Sunday we reflected on the Holy Family ... you might call it the 'human side' of Jesus's birth at Bethlehem, the fact that He chose to be born into the very poor and humble surroundings that Mary and Joseph could offer, but into a family rich in love: the love of the Our Lady & St Joseph as husband and wife, and their love of and faith in God Himself. This next Sunday of the Christmas season we have an altogether different Gospel passage — the beautiful and famous words which open St John's Gospel: *In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word was with God ... and the Word was God.* This *Word* is the very same Jesus — last week we dwelt more on His human nature, as a baby in the arms of Mary and Joseph; this week we emphasize His divine nature, the fact that He is Son of God, Word of God ... the one "through whom all things were made."

In fact, we've had this majestic Jn 1 'Prologue' a few times already this Christmas season. If you were at Mass on Christmas Day (as opposed to Midnight Christmas Eve),

you would have heard this Gospel passage that morning; and again it then cropped up for the Mass of New Year's Eve, a week into the Christmas season. Once again, today, it is repeated. And yet, in a way we cannot get enough of hearing it. The Church is in such awe of this Jn 1 Prologue that for several centuries (pre-Vat-II) every single Mass concluded with a Latin reading of this text, the 'last Gospel,' as it was called, which followed the final blessing. The Prologue, Jn 1: 1–18, marks out St John's Gospel in a particular way. St Mark, you probably know, begins his Gospel immediately with the Baptism of Jesus as a grown man on the brink of His Public ministry; St Matthew and St Luke go back to the beginning and have their 'infancy narratives' (chs.1 & 2) which describe, from different perspectives, the events of the incarnation of Jesus in Mary's womb, and then His birth. But St John goes back much much further, to the 'beginning of the beginning,' *before* the beginning: before human history, before even the beginning of time, to God happy in Himself before Creation, when there was only God, and "*the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*"

The centrality of this text for us as Christians is that it helps us never to lose sight of the fact that Jesus is always true God *and* true man. St John expresses this perfectly in those simple words, *The Word became flesh, and dwelt amongst us*: God's perfection in revealing Himself to us, as He had planned from the beginning. Jesus is the ultimate 'Word' from God ... foretold in the OT words spoken to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to Moses, the Kings and the Prophets ... but now spoken completely in *the Word* Himself. God can reveal Himself no more fully than by becoming man Himself, and living amongst us. All God wants of this world is that we hear His voice and really get to know Him and love Him ... *The universe was made for the world; the world for man; man for Christ* ... And now He is amongst us for ever: man and God can never be separated, because God and man can't be separated in Jesus; He is for ever true God and true man, binding man and God together in His own self. It's so wonderful, but it makes perfect sense. It certainly makes far more sense than any atheistic version of world events ... for the world is sheer meaninglessness without God's love and revelation in

Christ. God allows us to make sense of it, out of His graciousness, by entering His own world Himself, and revealing that meaning to us by His very mouth: the Word of God expressed in the words of men.

It is very important to read that word properly that is typically translated simply as 'dwelt' in v. 14: "*the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us.*" For it is rich word that only exists in the NT in St John's writings (i.e. in Jn's Gospel, & the book of Revelation). It would be more literally and strikingly translated as "*tabernacled amongst us*," or "*pitched His tent amongst us.*" Εσκηνωσεν, "tabernacled," from σκηνη, a tent or tabernacle, deliberately relates this whole NT phrase back to the OT *Tent of Meeting*, or sacred Tabernacle, of the Exodus event. Then, if you remember, God Himself gave His nomadic people His presence a real home with them, a permanent spiritual dwelling that never abandoned them. The visible dwelling of the pillar of fire, or the cloud of the *shekinah*, the divine presence, came upon the Tent, pitched the divine glory amongst them, and moved always with them faithfully. These OT back-references to the Tent/Tabernacle

in Jn 1, are also why, I'm sure, we have, to accompany it, that Sirach reading: in it, God's Holy Wisdom states that the Creator "gave My tent a resting place," and says that it is an eternal dwelling place with His people. In general, the Wisdom that the OT speaks of can be associated with the Λόγος, the Word, or Son, or Mind, of God — the very person of God who takes flesh in the NT, Jesus, the Christ.

St Augustine, the great Doctor of the Latin Church, born in 4th-c. N. Africa, and studying across the Roman world from Carthage to Milan, is a theologian of whom we are going to hear very often, I think, in this papacy of Leo XIV, an Augustinian friar (OSA). St Augustine's favourite text, as far as I can tell, was this Jn 1 Prologue. He quotes it endlessly, and comes back to it again and again. It held a mesmeric effect on him, I think, for he saw that, as it were, it was the Gospel in miniature. Here he is, preaching on the First Letter of St John, but before long he's referred back to the Gospel of John:

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, we have seen with our eyes, and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life." Who could touch the Word with his hands, were it not that the Word became

flesh and dwelt amongst us?

This Word, who became flesh in order that He could be touched by hands, began to be flesh in the Virgin Mary's womb. But He did not then begin to be the Word; for St John says, "That which was from the beginning." See how his Letter corroborates his Gospel, from which you heard a short time ago, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God."

As we proclaim and hear the awesome Gospel words of St John this Sunday — as St Augustine did — let's thank God for our solid 'Christmas faith' — the much-needed reassurance that *God is with us*; Jesus, the Word, dwells with us; we are not alone. May Jn 1 be the 'first' and also the 'last' Gospel for us! May we come back again and again to the text of the Jn 1 Prologue, not just several times each Christmastide, but even more often, to allow those words to be the bulwark against doubts and against the difficulties, even despair, that the devil sometimes throws us. Jesus — Son of God, Word made flesh — pitching His tent, His absolute commitment of eternal dwelling, in our midst is all we need for a happy life: "*for from His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*" 2026 can be so blessed, just by knowing this and taking it to heart.