

Sermon, Christmas Day 2006...

So how much do you really know about the Christmas story as it is told by the gospel writers? I should say *some* of the gospel writers. St Mark doesn't mention the birth of Jesus at all. Only St Luke mentions the shepherds. St Matthew has the archangel appear to Joseph, while St Luke has the Annunciation by Gabriel to Mary. There are no kings visiting the stable, only wise men. And the gospel does not say there were three of them – only that there were three gifts. The name *Bethlehem* means *house of bread*. Think about that when you come up to make your Christmas Communion. And the Holy Family were not poor. Joseph was a middle class craftsman. I do so adore the way the social-gospellers go on about Jesus being born so humble and poor – as if had he been born the Mayor of Stockport, the Incarnation wouldn't have been quite such a condescension!

St John – this morning's gospel – does not mention the birth of Jesus either. But he gives us this philosophical prologue *In the beginning was the Word*. Now what is this gospel about? What does St John mean by it? Well, it is a very aggressive piece of philosophy – really fierce polemic. St John is a street-fighter. St John has his intellectual enemies in his sights and he lets 'em have it with both barrels. These enemies were sophisticates who did not believe that God made the world. They believed that the world was made by an inferior power whom they called the Demiurge. St John hammers them mercilessly: *All things were made by him*. Then, in case these sophisticates were like our own modern theologians who can't understand words of one syllable, St John rams the point home again *And without him was not anything made that was made*.

This is what makes St John so lively for us today. For we too are pestered by sophisticates who don't believe that God designed and created the world. They believe in their own version of the Demiurge. Their Demiurge is chance, randomness, natural selection, materialistic evolution. If St John were to come back and read to us his gospel today, these sophisticates would accuse him of teaching creationism and he would be banned from state schools.

The truth is that the chance origin of the universe and the idea that there is nothing but matter and material change is as wrong today as it was in St John's day. It is bone-headed nonsense. We know that there is design and intention in the world – because we ourselves design and intend things. And it is wildly implausible to say that design and intention should have arisen out of randomness and chance. Atheism is tosh. And we can demonstrate that it's tosh. The great English philosopher Francis Bacon dismisses atheism like this:

I had rather believe all the fables in the legend and the Talmud and the Koran than that this universal frame is without a mind

G.K. Chesterton is just as powerful as Francis Bacon in his own swashbuckling style:

There is always something unthinkable about the whole evolutionary cosmos, because it is something coming out of nothing; an ever-increasing flood of water pouring out of an empty jug. In a word, the world does not explain itself, and cannot do so merely by continuing to expand itself. But anyway it is absurd for the evolutionist to complain

that it is unthinkable for an admittedly unthinkable God to make everything out of nothing; and then pretend it is more thinkable that nothing should turn itself into everything...

The Christian faith is under attack – It is being persecuted – today by rampant, vicious secularism. There are attempts to ban Christian symbols. It is illegal to teach in state schools that Christianity is true. Public morality is violently anti-Christian: the parson might be prosecuted for being *discriminatory* if he preaches against adultery and in favour of marriage and the family. All the drafts of the European Constitution omit any reference to God. And to think – this is the Europe of the cathedrals, of Leonardo and Bach, Giotto and Mozart's *Requiem*, of a parish church in every village.

Christians, all of us in this church today, must wake up pretty smartly to the secularising threat. If it goes unchallenged it will destroy European civilisation, culture and the way of life as we have known these things for two thousand years. The atheist challenge. Fair enough. Bring it on, I say. And – taking my cue from St John's Gospel, St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas - I'll wipe the floor with them. So the church has enemies who want to kill it. Fair enough. The church has always had enemies.

But the most dangerous enemy is the one who is already inside the city: the enemy within. The militant secularists and atheists, the chance and chaos merchants have been helped for the last few centuries by the very representatives of Christian civilisation. It began at the Reformation when men without imagination tried to turn Sacraments into mere signs – men who were so enamoured of holy books that they rammed them down our throats, but couldn't bring themselves to confess that there are holy objects: the reality of the Sacraments

Then there was the sophisticate Descartes – the so called Father of Modern Philosophy – Father of Lies, more like. Descartes who in place of the being of God supplied the egotistical *I think, therefore I am*. Wrong from the start. And from Descartes derives all the anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment: in place of the Commandments of God were given egalitarianism, universal human rights and sentimental *fraternite* – the very values that led directly to the guillotine and the reign of terror.

Ah, but the enemy is much closer to home even than that. For a hundred years leading theologians and teachers of religion have undermined the faith from within. These are the learned debunkers – sophisticates, iconoclasts – who say there is no Virgin Birth, no Resurrection, no Miracles. They have reduced Christian theology to mere psychology and millions have deserted the pews as a result. They say there were no miraculous loaves and fishes. It was just about *sharing*. But why would anyone want to note such a banality in his gospel? Jesus, they say, did not rise from the dead. It was just that *the disciples experienced a new sense of life*. Out of what, pray? If Christ be not raised our faith is in vain. But he is raised and it is the debunking bishops who are vain.

Now I want to reassure you and you build you up as a tower of strength against all this rubbish. St John tells us today the message of Christmas: *The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not*. Of course they are in the dark, the

lot of 'em – the atheists, materialists and secularists. How could they possibly comprehend? But we comprehend. We know that the Christian faith is true because again St John spells it out for us in words of one syllable: Christ is *the true Light which lighteth everyman*.

As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God. That's you and me. If we will receive him, that is what we shall be: the sons of God. Christianity is not otherworldly waffle. It is incarnated, made flesh. It is not idealistic. It is empirical – based on experience. You put your trust in God and God will come to you and restore you to the fullness of what he intended when he made the world.

And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father; full of grace and truth