

Christmas Day 2020

Fr Peter Groves

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I should begin by wishing you all a very Happy Christmas, but I should also begin by congratulating you on being here. Being in this physical place at this particular time, and also getting through almost to the end of the most challenging year most of us can remember. Today we are asked to celebrate, albeit in restricted circumstances. I trust that for you the remainder of this day will be more enjoyable than sitting and listening to me preach. Presents may well be on the way. They may well already have been opened, especially if children are involved. I hope you get what you wanted, and I also hope that you get some things you didn't want, because you didn't realise how much joy they would bring you. Surprise is often itself a gift.

In all the enjoyment there are bound also to be presents we don't want and which can't, by any stretch of the imagination, be called a success. Some presents baffle us by their uselessness or their ugliness. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and if our eye doesn't match that of the person giving us the present, we might not be over the moon. In such circumstances, we say "It's the thought that counts", and we're right to do so. The gospel teaches us that the value of giving is not to be measured in monetary amounts, but comes from the heart. It truly is the thought that counts.

Except that today, Christmas Day, there is one case, a very important case, in which it is not true to say "It's the thought that counts". Using that cliché works to protect us from our own materialism, and usually that is a very good thing. But there is also a materialism from which we don't need to be protected, and that is the divine materialism we call the doctrine of the incarnation.

“In many and various ways God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets, but now, in the last days, he has spoken to us in his Son.” God’s love for us is not an abstract thought, it is a material thing, a real thing, an actual something which we call a person, the person of Jesus of Nazareth. I can think something good, something loving and beneficial, but if I don’t act upon it at all, if I don’t say or do something as a result of that good thought, then its goodness has not been brought to fruition, it hasn’t managed to be all that it might be. God both acts and speaks his love for us in Christ, because – in the Word of God incarnate – we encounter a word and action as one and the same, the outpouring in speech and in deed of God’s self-giving love.

In many and various ways God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets, but now, in the last days, he has spoken to us in his Son. The Word of God lives throughout the Old Testament as something vital, something alive and active which itself gives life to that which is created. God spoke, and it was done. By

the word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. The Word of the Lord comes to the prophets and fills them, and manifests itself in what they say but also in what they do. The prophetic signs of Jeremiah and Ezekiel speak the word of the Lord as clearly as their fiery sermons. The Word and the acts of God should not be separated: what God says and what God does both tell us of the same God, the God of Israel who has visited and redeemed his people.

If God's love were abstract thought, if it really is the case that with God it's the thought that counts, then God would not come among us. Sending benevolent thoughts from afar, remaining on the outside, God could speak to his creation. He could voice abstract thought without consequence. By entering into human life, instead of speaking to his creation, God speaks through his creation. The person of Jesus Christ is the person of God speaking, the living out in and among humanity of the divine life which God has been communicating from the first. The context is your life

and mine, the very humanity which we all share, the life of weakness and selfishness which is all too familiar, the fear and vulnerability which we have all felt this year, the life of wanting everything, including ourselves, to be so much better than it seems able to be. This is the medium of God's speech, and here the medium is precisely the message. It is Jesus Christ, and him crucified, that God is speaking to the oh so noisy world.

And God's speech is not our speech. In order to get our message across, we are inclined to make ever more noise, to speak ever more loudly, to use ever more effective means of amplification. A God of distance, a God who sends thoughts from afar, would have to shout. But the God who comes among us speaks from within, prompts us gently and insistently in the life of the child whom we greet this morning. Here and today we celebrate the paradoxical truth that the speech of God can be silent, passive, weak, a new born baby amidst the cacophony of the world. Here is a speech, an act, a gift which is not selfish, does not force itself,

is not yelled, and too it does not cease. In the beginning was the word, here and now is the word, spoken to and for all time in the person of Jesus Christ.