

Donnybrook

31 December 2021

Welcome

You might think that speech writers were a new invention. This is not so. St Augustine was a trained speech writer and worked for the Roman emperor in Milan. Augustine was fascinated by words and the power of speech. You make the air move with your lips and what is in your mind is suddenly in my mind. He realised that speech was not just the transfer of information between brains: instead by means of speech we become present to each other and part of each other's lives.

Topic

Such an approach may help us enter into the world of our Gospel today, the prologue of John.

Steps

In the beginning was the Word: word here means the mind of God, the inner being of God coming to outward expression. This happens in creation. The sheer wonder of it all, made clearer by modern science, points us towards the creator. A poet in the Old Testament, reflecting on the beauty of the world, put it like this: we could say more but we could never say enough. Let the final word be, he is the All.

The word was made flesh. This phrase is familiar not only from the Gospel but also from the Angelus. Familiar, yes, but still a strange thing to say. In our experience, words do come to material expression in sound, as St Augustine observed, but they do not in any sense "become flesh". With this unexpected juxtaposition, the writer is pointing us to Jesus, the word made flesh. The opening words of the Hebrews can help us here.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1:1-3a)

No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son who has made him known. A more literal translation would be: It is this only Son who has told the story of God. As we know from John's Gospel, the story is a love story. God has told us his story in the story of a single, fragile human life, to speak to us from within our human experience. Again, familiarity should not blind us to just how extraordinary that claim is.

Conclusion

As St Augustine knew, words serve not just to transfer information but to enable encounter. By means of the Word made flesh God has reached out to all humanity, telling us how much we are loved and calling us back to our true nature as children of God. In the words of the Wexford carol:

Good people all this Christmastide,
Consider well and bear in mind
What our good God for us has done
In sending his beloved Son.