19 January 2020: Choral Eucharist
The Second Sunday of Epiphany
Isaiah 49:1-7, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, John 1:29-42
The Revd Canon Edmund Newey, The Sub Dean

‘They came and saw where Jesus was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.’

In nomine…

John’s gospel is a curious mixture. Reading just the first Chapter, for instance, you could be forgiven for being baffled by the abrupt change of gear from the poetry of the Prologue to the prose narratives that follow. The sublime cadences of the Prologue are very familiar to us from the services of Christmas. In the marvellous phrase from the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols, they ‘unfold the great mystery of the incarnation’. Consciously echoing the creation story in the first chapter of the Bible, John shows us Christ as the new creation. The unsurpassed theological poetry of these verses frames Christ’s coming as the new genesis, the beginning again – palingenesis in the Greek – a re-making, re-framing of our nature in the incarnate Christ. Christ who is mercy made flesh, mercy made afresh.

And then, just a few verses later, still in the same chapter and on the same page, we come across the verse I took as my text: ‘They came and saw where Jesus was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.’ We leave the vision of ‘the heavenly Word proceeding forth yet leaving not his Father’s side’ and find ourselves dragging along with the disciples checking out Jesus’s accommodation arrangements. The dullness of the scene is epitomised by that precise reference to perhaps the least exciting of all times of the day: ‘about four o’clock in the afternoon.’ Try as we might, it’s quite hard not to see a shift here from the sublime to the banal.

Except that nothing in John’s gospel is banal. Nothing in John’s gospel is banal, because nothing in life is banal. Or better, the banalities of life are transfigured in Christ: Christ who is mercy made flesh, mercy made afresh. His new and greater genesis – palingenesis – touches every place and every time, even four o’clock in the afternoon. This truth came
home to me very powerfully at the requiem eucharist for Father Michael Farthing last week. As the funeral address so beautifully drew out, Michael’s sixty or more years as a priest were both utterly ordinary and utterly extraordinary. Michael was entirely self-effacing – I can think of few people less troubled by their ego than he was – and his ministry was cut from the same cloth: it never drew attention to itself, it simply took place. It was this very ordinariness that made it extraordinary: as Peter Groves’ eulogy put it, every sacrament celebrated, every sermon preached, every sick parishioner visited, every grieving family comforted, was encountering nothing less than the love of God. Because this is what the love of God looks like: in the beginning was the Word; what has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people; but that Word, that life and light are met in the most ordinary circumstances, even – perhaps especially – over an indifferent cup of tea in a dull front room at four o’clock in the afternoon.

It is difficult to recognise this, but once we have recognised it, it is even more difficult to live it. We are so readily deceived into thinking that the kingdom of God is happening somewhere else: ‘while the light fails/on a winter’s afternoon, in a secluded chapel’; or in those thin places at the margins of our archipelago: Iona, Lindisfarne, Lundy, Bardsey; or in Taizé, or over the road at St Aldate’s or St Ebbe’s; or in the crypt at St Martin in the Fields, in the local Emmaus community or L’Arche house; anywhere in fact but where we are. The truth, of course, is that ‘the kingdom is among you’; the Word is made flesh here – ‘here is the Lamb of God’; the love of God summons us now.

Today’s gospel reading poses two key questions, one made by the Lord, the second by the disciples. ‘What are you looking for?’, asks Jesus; ‘Where are you staying?’ ask the disciples. These are classic Johannine questions: at once ordinary and extraordinary; boringly mundane and soaringly sublime.

‘What are you looking for?’ is one way of putting it, but as John Pridmore points out the older translation gets nearer the proper meaning: ‘What do you seek?’. ‘I look for spectacles I have lost; I seek the meaning of life. The two activities are not the same’. So when Jesus in the AV says ‘What do you seek?’ perhaps we have a better inkling. The answer is God. What do you seek? Nothing less than God, whom we are commanded to love with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

And then ‘where are you staying?’ say the disciples. It’s the sort of phrase we utter to fill an awkward gap in a conversation with a person we’ve just met – and that may even be the purpose it was serving for the disciples when they asked it of Jesus. The answer is
‘here’. ‘Where are you staying?’, we ask Jesus and he answers us: here; with you, with your human race in all its glory and shame; but also with me, in all my glory and shame; and with you in all yours.

Far from being banal, these are questions that all of us need to ask and answer, questions about purpose and commitment, direction and focus, rootedness and context. The answers to the two questions are different: What are you looking for? – God; ‘Where are you staying? – here. But, with another characteristic Johannine twist, the answer to both questions is actually the same and it is literally staring the disciples in the face. The answer is Christ, the one who is both God and here. What are you looking for? We are looking for Christ. Where are you staying? We are staying with Christ.

These two questions take us to the heart of the human quest for meaning: what do you seek? And in the light of that question: where are you staying? Where are you going to remain? Where are you going to abide?

For Christians the answer to both is Christ: the one we seek, because he first sought us; the one with whom we stay because he chooses to stay with us, who invites us to abide in him as he abides in us.

That is easily said, but living it is the work of a lifetime and a labour that we are called to undertake not when we are ready, not in some future when the circumstances are propitious, but here and now. Our unreadiness and unworthiness are no excuse: of course we aren’t ready and of course we are unworthy, just as Andrew and Simon Peter were. But, as Paul assures us in today’s epistle, in Christ that unreadiness and unworthiness are set aside:

… the grace of God… has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind…

God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

In nomine…