24 December 2019: Midnight Eucharist
Christmas Eve

Isa 52: 7-10; Heb 1: 1-4; John 1: 1–14
The Revd Canon Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity

‘Christmas: the Deepest Magic’

It is said that at the moment of Christ’s birth creation held its breath and out in the depths of the cosmos a new star was born, silently.

It is said old time stopped as a new time began; the time of fulfilment, the fullness of a time that stretched right back to an eternal desire circulating in God. From the foundations of the world this moment had been known, decided. Few people noticed. Only in Mary was the heart pumping fast with flows of divine grace and a realization dawning of what was coming to pass.

It is said the rocks trembled, the wind stilled, the seas were hushed. Day and night were poised on the edge of a new revelation so a tingling was felt in the veins of the leaves on each tree, in the fibres of each plant, blood stirred – and birds awoke. *Quid est?* quoth the crow. What is it? What comes? *Quid agit?* sang the thrush. What is happening? *Quid loquitur?* asked the sparrow. What calls? It was still dark when a baby cried.

These are ancient fables in Greek and Syriac and Latin reflections witnessing to the deepest magic; the magic of the incarnation of God; the magic of He through whom creation came to be now entering His own creation. Impossible. Miraculous. What is real if this can occur? The fabric of the real is unravelled and rewoven. That which is created can say nothing. It is dumbfounded. It is awestruck. But it knows, knows down to the tingling in its roots, the roots of stars and planets and earth and mountains and being itself; knows the change, the transformation. Nothing will ever be the same again. Immanuel. God in and with us.

It is said that from around the year 1500 C.E. the world became disenchanted. Old beliefs began to flounder in a new secular materialism. It is said that God died, the Spirit snuffed out; in the churches the altars were stripped and the box pews began to empty. There were certainly changes in human sensibility and culture, but I tell you God did not
take flight from the world created through God’s Word. This could never be. People might forget, ignore, no longer speak of the deepest magic, but the magic of regeneration worked all the same in all its divine profundity; the alchemical transformation still worked in the hearts and souls of those who were open to receive it. This is the poet Robert Herrick writing in the mid Seventeenth century about Christmas Eve:

Why does the chilling winter’s morn
Smile, like a field beset with corn?
Or smell like a meadow newly shorn
Thus on a sudden? Come and see
The cause, why things thus fragrant be.

Circumstances change, names and habits change, but all is grace, and grace is eternal and it flows through creation (the stunning expression of God’s free and creative love). It flows continually and the incarnation changes everything; everything. It turns water into wine; oil into gladness – a good Anglo-Saxon word for wellbeing and delight. What the ancient Hebrews called tov and shalom. And God saw all that was created and it was good; it was very good. In Hebrew: meod tov. This is the gospel. The good news. Christ did not just come to proclaim this good news. Christ is the good news; the superabundant goodness of God that is God that came and lived among us; the Creator in and with creation. All creation. Not just human beings. The birth of Christ, the incarnation, is the unutterable expression of God’s love for that which God created - from the myriad of galaxies to the tiniest of cells; for all that lives and breathes and forms the fabric of existence.

A baby cries in the night and the world is refashioned; that is the work of the deepest magic. It is not like all our other magics, which try to control – people, events and elements. The magic operations of love work from within to release and realize; so that we come into what we always knew we were but were unable to do for ourselves. That which we long for, that which the nations have desired over aeons and civilisations have sought, comes to fruition in the fullness of time. Christ is the fulfilment of time. And it puts into its place all our tinsel and gift-wrappings; all our decorations and partying. Not with a NO. Not with a judgement of “Cast these away.” And “Cease your cheap festivities”. It puts all these things in place with a vast and eternal YES. An utterly transformative YES. The enchantment is real. The enchantment is true. Be generous. Be liberal. Be festive. Decorate your halls and homes with glittering lights, holly and mistletoe. String your cards and hang your crepe-paper streamers. But understand the
power of the magic at work here; its source in God, its end in God: God in and God with us. Sings carols. Make music. Take up your instruments and play. The angels do the same. Creation does the same. Being blessed bless and give thanks and bestow. This isn’t Black Friday. It is White Eternal Sunday and Sabbath, and everything is freely given. Receive. Noel.

For here is the magic; the deeper magic; the tincture that will give colour to everything. *En arkh hēn ho Logos*. In the beginning was the Word. *En arkh hēn ho Logos*. The words are full of air - long vowel sounds that melt the consonants and lengthen the breathing so that something is felt, not heard. The lowest note on an organ pipe 236 feet long is 2 herz, a C sounded seven octaves below the lowest C on a piano. It is inaudible to the human ear. The air just vibrates. *En arkh hēn ho Logos*. The eighth century Irish theologian, Eriugena, meditating on these opening words of John’s Gospel, asks “Who can say this?” I am only reading it; repeating it. But who can say it? Who gives this breath and authors these sounds? The human voice is only a reed registering the passing wind, the Spirit of God, descending, distending through the muscles and corpuscles, the rib-cage, the tissue, the brain, knitting together (as in the womb of Mary) the God who appears in and to and to be with all that God created. The silence is so profound it vibrates. *En arkh hēn ho Logos*. In the beginning was the Word. *Quid est*? quoth the crow. What is it? What comes? *Quid agit*? sang the thrush. What is happening? *Quid loquitur*? asked the sparrow. What calls? It was still dark when a baby cried. O come let us adore him.