26 January 2020: Choral Matins
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Amos 3:1-8, 1 John 1:1-4
The Revd Canon Edmund Newey, The Sub Dean

‘We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.’

In nomine…

My three years at theological college in the late 1990s were, by and large, a delight. I left Westcott House with a theology degree, a firm sense of the discipline of daily prayer, a lasting set of friendships and a fiancée! I count it as a great privilege that the Church – by which I mean those like you and me who give regularly to support its ministry – felt able to invest such a significant sum in training me for three years. I am hugely grateful for that time and I have drawn on it every day of my life as a priest since then. Today residential theological colleges are facing ever more stringent financial constraints and my college, Westcott’s, future looks decidedly uncertain. I pray that ways will be found to secure this vital route to ministry in the Church.

But for all their benefits there is perhaps one chief danger associated with residential training of the sort I underwent, and that is the risk of going native, of being so acclimatised to the milieu of the Church of England that one loses the outsiders’ perspective. This danger is perhaps most evident in the vocabulary you pick up at theological college. Not just the theological jargon and the in-jokes, though there are plenty of both, but also the sorts of words and phrases that come to sound entirely normal to those on the inside but are pretty bizarre or off-putting to those on the outside. Once in my first parish I remember inviting the congregation to stay after the service for coffee and fellowship. To me this was an absolutely straightforward phrase, but over Sunday lunch afterwards my wife pointed out how peculiar it sounded to her. Nobody in the world outside the Church would ever be invited to stay for fellowship: to her it sounded not just alien but actually a bit sinister: not quite ‘would you like to come and see my etchings?’, but definitely a bit weird. Please note that after Matins today you are warmly invited to tea and coffee in the Priory Room: fellowship is entirely optional!
I was effectively using fellowship to mean a friendly chat. But Emma was on to something. Theologically the range of words we translate as ‘fellowship’ means an awful lot more than pleasantries over tea and biscuits. ‘We declare to you what we have seen and heard’, says Saint John in this morning’s second reading, ‘so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.’ This verse from the first epistle of John is almost as radical in its own way as the more famous verse from the parallel passage in the first Chapter of Saint John’s gospel: ‘and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory’. The divine Word that shared our flesh in doing so invites us to fellowship with the Father.

When I invited the congregation in Fallowfield to stay for fellowship my wife squirmed. But we should squirm too in a rather different way when we hear John’s words that ‘our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son’. A declaration of this sort is inconceivable, impossible within the context of what we call the OT. The underlying Hebrew term here is *chabar* meaning to bind or to join together: it can be used in a whole range of contexts from the drawing of curtains to the forming of alliances between nations term, from being an accomplice in wrongdoing to companionship in worship. But what it can never describe is a bond between humanity and God, between creation and Creator, pot and potter. To use it in this way is every bit as scandalous as to claim that the divine Word has become flesh.

Take this morning’s psalm. On the one hand it goes a long way to proclaim the Lord’s presence with and to his people. God speaks to his people, he manifests himself from ‘the rising up of the sun to the going down thereof’; he speaks and his people hear and call upon him. The relationship is real and it works in both directions – God to God’s people, God’s people to God – but the distance is always maintained: God speaks from heaven, the heaven that ‘declares his righteousness’. There is communication, but there is no communion, no *chabar*, no fellowship.

In today’s first reading from the prophet Amos the same applies. The prophets are those who listen for God’s word, hear it and proclaim it, sometimes in judgement, sometimes in blessing. But again they do not enjoy *chabar*, fellowship with God.

Surely the Lord GOD does nothing,
    without revealing his secret
    to his servants the prophets.
The Lord God reveals his secret to his prophets, but he does not have fellowship with them.

So when we hear this morning’s second lesson we should indeed be startled:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

The Prologue to John’s Gospel proclaims what was in the beginning; this opening passage of John’s first epistle proclaims what was from the beginning: ‘things hidden from the foundation of the world,’ as Jesus puts it elsewhere: things that have always been the case, but that have been hidden from us until the revelation brought by Jesus the Christ.

The verbs in this passage tell a clear story. First those authoritative theological verbs that we might expect: declare, reveal, testify; but then the verbs that speak of relationship, fellowship, communion: hear, see, look, touch, and not just touch, but, emphatically, ‘touch with our hands’.

In the beginning God is; from the beginning God is with: with God’s people, in fellowship with his creation. Near enough not just to be heard, seen and looked at, but to be touched, with our hands. Recognising this is difficult – impossible but for the grace of Christ – and imperfectly realised in this world but when at last it is then in John’s words ‘our joy may be complete’.

In nomine…