**SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS**

**2nd January 2022**

The readings for this Sunday are the same for those of last year and so I apologise for repeating and contradicting myself.

**First Reading**

**Ecclesiasticus aka The Wisdom of Ben Sirach 24:1-2, 8-12**

This poem in praise of wisdom is one of those rich and evocative Old Testament Wisdom texts which laid the groundwork for John’s idea of Jesus as the Logos, which is the Gospel for to-day.

The Jewish Ben Sirach lived in world of Greek culture (probably Egypt) and inherited ideas from both traditions. So he imagines Wisdom as a heavenly woman able to negotiate with God. Such ideas were common in the Greek Pantheon, but anathema to Judaism but it forms the background of John’s Gospel. (In his work John combines many Greek ideas with Hebrew ones.)

In spite of the fact that some influential Jewish thinkers had introduced Greek ideas such as this, it would be quite wrong to think that they regarded Wisdom as a god distinct from Yahweh. Such an idea would be incompatible with their strict monotheism which distinguished Jews from everyone else. If they personified Wisdom and spoke of its pre-existence they did so only to depict poetically and vividly God's plan for the whole created world.

Such speculation did, however, prepare for the Christian doctrine of the pre-existence and divine nature of Jesus.

**Second Reading Ephesians 1:3-6 15-18**

This reading is formed of a blessing (1:3-6) and thanksgiving (1: 15-16) leading into an intercession (1:17-18).

Blessed be God! The initial blessing is modelled on the Jewish berakah. This was a 'blessing' of God in thanksgiving for his previous 'blessing.' It is helpful to understand that Jewish culture thought of blessing as being two-way like a hand-shake. It was recited at specific points of the synagogue liturgy and in the dialogue of the Last Supper.

To-day’s passage mentions the major themes of the remainder of the letter and might almost be a precis of Christian doctrine. The opening of Ephesians is the best account of the Christian mystery in the New Testament. It also serves to redress Paul's presentation in his letter to the Romans. There we have the problem expressed in legal terms. It focuses on sin and guilt and is downbeat. The Letter to the Ephesians, on the other hand, has a more positive atmosphere. Like the Gospel of John, it is more optimistic with an emphasis on a re-creation of the world.

Usually, Paul starts his letters with praise and thanksgiving. Here, however, the prayer is unusually long. Paul gives thanks and at the same time proclaims God's mysterious plan, which he understood through a revelation (3:3). In this word he is thinking of his conversion on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus. The conversation with the risen Christ on that occasion convinced Paul that Christians together made up the risen Body of Christ on earth. They had been incorporated into that Body by Baptism and were therefore “in Christ” and part of his visible resurrected presence on earth.

Every creature comes from God through his Son in whom God contemplates his own riches, and on whom he pours his love. We are as God has loved us, and we are in him, in some way, from the beginning.

The reading we have to-day omits vv 7-14 where Paul mentions our ‘freedom, sealed by his blood’ (v. 7) This does not mean that Christ shed his blood to make amends to his Father offended by sin, as if God were resentful as we often are, and as if his dignity were offended. Paul is referring to a biblical law: the emancipation of slaves which used to be signed in blood.

In Exodus 21;5-6, we have the situation of a slave refusing his freedom, when offered it because he loved his master and his family. In this case, he voluntarily remained with them continuing to serve them as before. To mark his new status, he had the lobe of his ear pierced with an awl in the doorpost of the house. The covenant was thus sealed with blood.

**Gospel John l:1-18**

In this epic passage John uses one key word which combines two fundamental ideas, one Greek and one Hebrew. The word is Logos, for which many translators use the word ‘word’ But this is hopelessly deficient. The problem is that no one word can do justice to ‘Logos’.

First, the Hebrew idea. The opening words of John are identical to the opening words of Genesis which they are deliberately intended to mimic. In Genesis, the Spirit of God moved over the waters, bringing light to the darkness. The Hebrew for Spirit was Ruach and it can also be translated Wind, Breath, and Life and all these ideas must be kept in mind as we read. Our breath is a sign that we are alive and when we speak, we breathe out, uttering words, expressing ideas. So, Genesis gives us the image of God breathing over the waters, bringing light, life and order to the cosmos. Being the breath of God, Ruach also expressed his will and can therefore also be thought of as his ‘word’.

As to the Greek. The common Greek word for ‘word’ was Rhema, but Logos was closer to Ruach. Logos contained the essence of Greek wisdom and knowledge and truth. For the Stoic philosophers (c.300 B.C. ff) Logos was the rational principle which underpinned the universe. It was used to mean a universal divine reason, immanent in nature, yet superior to imperfections in the cosmos and humanity. It was an eternal and unchanging truth present from the time of creation, available to every individual who seeks it. It was thought of as a light which provides understanding to everyone who comes into the world (John 1;9-10) and was a common idea to many of the Greek philosophers.

In particular, the Angel of the Lord in the Hebrew Tanakh (what we call the Old Testament) was identified with the logos by Philo, a Hellenistic Jew who was slightly older than Jesus. He said that the logos was God's instrument in the creation of the Universe.

So in his Prologue, John identifies the Logos with Jesus, combining Greek and Hebrew cultures equally. The Logos was not just the Word of God but Knowledge, Life and the visible expression of the mind of God.

The Prologue now forms a fitting introduction to the Fourth Gospel since it tells us about the divine and eternal origins of him whose work is described in the subsequent chapters. The Prologue is John’s Nativity. It does what the Nativity stories in Matthew and Luke do, but pushes the story back from Bethlehem to Creation.

If Logos can have an antonym, it is ‘Sarx’ translated ‘flesh’ Sarx was corrupt, weak, despised and mortal. And the climax of his Prologue comes in v.14 when John utters the most explosive ‘the Logos became Sarx’ (the Word became flesh). John even defies normal rules of grammar by placing the two nouns adjacently to give maximum impact. By the incarnation a spiritual God becomes present visibly and personally to humankind and has become human in the fullest sense. It was a phrase which would have had an impact far greater than we can imagine considering our familiarity with it.

After the words ‘*the Word was made flesh*’ John then says ‘*he lived among us*’ The full sense of this phrase is also lost in English, but the word for ‘lived’ means ‘camped’ as in a tent. The implication is that his presence among us was temporary. It was as if he were on a journey which would come to an end.

In the expression John recalls how Yahweh dwelt among the Israelites in the Tent of Meeting (Exodus 33:7-11). Coincidentally, the Greek word for tent (skéné) also sounds like the Hebrew word for glory, (shekinah) which was another expression of God's presence (see Exodus 40:34; 1 Kings 8:11). In such terms John is expressing emphatically that, in Jesus, God is present among humankind and in the end reveals his ‘glory’ through the Crucifixion.

The rest of the Gospel describes how the claims made in the Prologue are worked out in practice. But, unlike the Synoptics, John is not interested in what happened. Instead, he tells us the *meaning* of what happened. (Despite this, John is often more reliable in his Jerusalem locations than the Synoptics)

The prologue primarily depicts Jesus as the one who makes the Father known

to men and women. Since he alone was with God (v. 1) and since he alone had seen God (v. 18), he alone could reveal the full truth about God. Unlike the Synoptists who presented Jesus as the Messiah who inaugurates the Kingdom of God, John will continue in the rest of the Gospel to present Jesus primarily as the Revealer of the Father and of the Father's plan of salvation.