

JANUARY

03

SECOND SUNDAY
OF CHRISTMAS

PITCHED HIS TENT AMONG US

Two Gospels, Mark and John, do not have accounts of the birth of Jesus. John's Gospel opens with a majestically flowing meditation on how 'the Word was made flesh' and

dwelt among us. This might originally have been a poem or hymn intended to be sung at an early liturgy of the community. It echoes another book in the bible, Genesis, the very first one, that begins with an account of creation. John takes the opening words of Genesis, "In the beginning." Genesis saw creation as shaped by the word spoken by

God – e.g. when God says, 'Let there be light', the primal darkness is suddenly illuminated by a burst of light. John identifies that Word as a person, Jesus. Now that he has come among us, our world is dramatically changed. We usually say, in the Angelus, for example, that the Word "dwelt among us." Literally, it is "he pitched his tent among us." The fragile, frail flesh of a human body, indeed of a child, has become the tent where God dwells. But the word 'tent' would also remind a devout Jew of the 'tent of meeting,' the forerunner of the temple, which Moses pitched in the desert and where he met God.

The darkness of sin and unbelief may struggle to overcome the fragile Word, but it

will not succeed. This Word who has become flesh is the son of Mary. The Jews believed that human beings would never be able to see God. Even Moses had only managed to catch a glimpse of God's back as he stood huddled in a cleft of the Holy Mountain of Sinai. It is Jesus, the only Son who was from the beginning nearest the very heart of God, who has made him known by taking on a human body like ours. This is the deepest mystery of Christmas.

TODAY'S READINGS

IS 62:1-5 1COR 12:4-11 JOHN 2:1-11

God's Word continues on page 46



GOD'S WORD THIS SEASON

JANUARY

10

BAPTISM OF
THE LORD

THE HEAVENS OPENED

Today's feast marks the end of the Christmas season. It also has echoes of Advent when we first encountered John and his baptism. There are two parts to the reading.

The first describes the feeling of expectancy that gripped the people. John the Baptist was a fresh voice that rang out with authority. Could he be the Messiah they expected to throw off the yoke of Roman oppressor and restore the ancient Kingdom of Israel? John is quick to dampen their expectations. There is

someone more powerful than he on the way whose sandals John is unfit to untie – this was a task normally reserved for a slave.

The second part of the reading describes the baptism of Jesus and its aftermath. While Mark and Matthew place the opening of the heavens at the actual moment of the baptism, Luke instead places it later, while 'Jesus was at prayer.' Luke has a particular interest in Jesus' prayer and shows him praying at the most important moment of his life, before calling the twelve, for example, before his passion and again on the cross.

When we say, 'the heavens opened' we usually

mean there was a heavy rain shower. For Jews, it meant that the barrier separating the earthly world from the heavenly was opened for a moment. 'The Spirit descended on him in bodily shape, like a dove.' In the Old Testament, the Spirit descended on prophets to mark them out as God's servants. The heavenly voice declares that this man on whom the Spirit rests is not simply another prophet: he is the Son, the Beloved, on whom God's favour rests.

TODAY'S READINGS

IS 40:1-5, 9-11 1 TI 2:11-14
LUKE 3:15-16, 21-22

JANUARY

17

SECOND SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

AN ABUNDANCE OF WINE

The situation in today's Gospel is a very ordinary one – a village wedding to which everyone has been invited. That includes not just the immediate family

and neighbours of the bride and groom, but 'friends of friends' like the disciples Jesus brings along with his family. Cana is just about three or four miles, from Nazareth, so it is not unlikely that either bride or groom were relatives of Jesus and Mary. In the Middle East, hospitality is an important virtue. Being niggardly with food and drink was shameful: it marked people off as mean. Being generous on the other hand increased the honour and reputation of families or individuals. Unexpected guests could

easily strain the resources a family had laid by for the occasion, and that is where our story begins. The mother of Jesus has spotted that the wine is fast running out and realises how shamed the young couple and their families will be by such a disaster. John never calls her Mary but always 'the Mother of Jesus.'

This is a miracle story, but John takes care not to use that word. He prefers the word 'sign.' At the end, he tells us that this was the first of the signs given by Jesus. Sign is different from miracle, because it points to something more mysterious. Miracles like this are 'gift miracles.' A marriage feast was one of the signs of the Kingdom of God. God would never be niggardly at the wedding feast of the Kingdom. The jars could hold between 120 and 180 gallons: for us, that is between 500 and 800 litre bottles of wine!

The sheer abundance and quality of the gift is what counts. It is a moment of revelation in which Jesus lets his glory as God's Son shine through at a village wedding. Abundance is a key to the Gospel of John. Jesus the vine produces fruit in abundance (John 15). The crowd is fed with an abundance of bread and fish so that there are twelve baskets of leftovers (John 6). The fishermen who caught nothing soon find their nets stretched to breaking point (John 21). All these are ways of showing the truth of what Jesus says: 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full' (John 10:10).

TODAY'S READINGS

IS 62:1-5 1 COR 12:4-11
JOHN 2:1-11

JANUARY

24

THIRD SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

YEAR OF GOD'S FAVOUR

Today's Gospel is a bit complicated. It begins by giving us the opening words, addressed to someone called 'Theophilus' – a name that literally means 'friend of God.'

Theophilus may have been a real person to whom Luke dedicated his Gospel, but every reader is a 'Theophilus' a 'friend of God.'

Luke then jumps to a story about the adult Jesus and his first sermon in his home town. This is a long story and it will be continued next Sunday. It takes

place in the synagogue during the Sabbath morning service. The high point of the service was the reading from the Law, followed by a shorter reading from one of the prophetic books. Being invited to speak at the service was an honour. The congregation was probably expecting a sermon from this local boy in whose fame family and neighbours basked. When he begins to read, he does not read the chosen lesson for the day, but reads two sections from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6). They speak about a mysterious figure, empowered by the Spirit, 'to bring Good News to the poor,' to proclaim liberty to captives, restoration of sight to

the blind and a year of God's favour.

The year of God's favour was probably the jubilee year that took place every forty-nine years. The land was rested, as no new crops were planted or harvested. Debts were cancelled and people, who had been forced to sell their land because of debt, were entitled to reclaim it. Our 'Holy Year of Mercy' echoes the biblical jubilee year.

TODAY'S READINGS

NEH 8:2-6, 8-10 1 COR 12: 12-30
LUKE 1:1-4, 4:12-21

JANUARY

31

FOURTH SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

JUST ONE OF US

Today's Gospel continues the story of Jesus' sermon in Nazareth we began reading last Sunday. It begins by recalling the words at the end of last Sunday's Gospel – 'this text is being fulfilled today, even as you listen.' Luke does not tell us exactly what Jesus said in his sermon: we will learn that as we follow Jesus the preacher throughout the rest of this year.

This preacher has a gift for weaving words that win over his hearers. As often happens when local boys have done well, some of the neighbours are only too eager to recall his very ordinary origins: he is just one of themselves.

Jesus senses that feelings are turning against him. He quotes the proverb, 'Physician heal yourself.' They have welcomed him because they were expecting him some act of prophetic power. He is not surprised by the rejection. That always happens to prophets, especially when they do not work miracles for their supporters. During a long draught, Elijah did not provide miraculous food for Israelites, but for a pagan widow and her son in a foreign town. Elishah did not cure lepers in Israel, but he did cure Naaman, a Syrian general.

This talk of divine favours for foreigners is the last straw. They rise up in anger, intending to push him towards a cliff edge, intending to throw him over and leave him to die. In the disorder, Jesus manages to slip away from the crowd and withdraw



TODAY'S READINGS

JER 1:4-5. 17-19 1COR 12:31-13:13 LUKE 4:21-30