SECOND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS

Gospel: John 1: 1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

REFLECTION 1:   WORD MADE FLESH

As I began work as a priest shortly after ordination in May 1957, I was very much aware of what was referred to as 'The Last Gospel'. It was the same Gospel we have just heard today, the second Sunday after Christmas and is in fact the opening chapter of St. John's Gospel, though read at the end of Mass in pre-Vatican II times. It used to be said that you would have 'missed Mass', if you came late for the first Gospel or left before the last. Now, this Gospel speaks eloquently about the 'Word'. Jesus, as we know is the Divine Word. We may very well ask the question – 'why refer to the Messiah, Jesus Christ as 'The Word'? Well, if you read the Old Testament from Genesis to Macabees you will understand that the whole thrust of the Old Testament could be summed up in four letters – The Word – the Messiah, the future Saviour of mankind is coming. So all that was said of him, prophesied of him, was actually realised in the fact that this 'Word' had now become flesh in reality, in a person, in the dream 'born in a shepherd's shed' in Bethlehem.

The life of Jesus Christ is made known to us through the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. So maybe I may speak briefly for today on just one aspect of the Word that is Jesus – the Comfortable word. Comfortable words as I understand them are not only soothing, calming, restful, encouraging words, they are also positive. The Good News isn't negative, discouraging or judgemental. John's Gospel affirms the positive purpose of the Word; 'God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that through him the world may be saved'. The incarnation was a positive action which offered the opportunity for the relationship with God to be restored, an offer made to all who chose to receive it. The Book of Common Prayer put it nicely, 'Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Jesus Christ says to all that truly come to him'. The storehouse of comfortable words is not confined to the New Testament – there are also significant phrases and sentences in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms.

Take for instance the following – Psalm 23, The Good Shepherd 'restores my soul', the opening words of Psalm 46, 'Our God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble', and Psalm 121 'The Lord who looks after you will not slumber'. The Psalms persistently point to the providence of God as a basic tenet of faith – a conviction arrived at in the history of God's people and in the stories of individual lives. We find in the pages of the Old Testament comfortable words that justify and reassure us, bringing serenity to our minds and satisfaction to our hearts.

When God chose to come into our world in the person of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of John welcomed him as 'The Word made flesh' who 'dwelt among us'. In that, he was moved to compassion towards the needs of sinful humanity. Jesus was leading us in action. He then sent his disciples out to preach the Gospel by proclaiming it in words, 'to heal the sick' which is the acting out of those words – making the Word become flesh. As John Milton would write, 'Apt words have power to soothe the tumours of a troubled mind, and are balm to festered wounds'. Such words can be an instrument of peace, an orchestration of joy and a symphony of salvation.