

FR HUGH'S HOMILY FOR 3RD SUNDAY ADVENT YR B

CSI became one of the most famous TV police programmes in the last few decades. Endless new tricks that the forensic scientists/investigators could perform to discover the perpetrator but especially name of the victim's body. In fact this was so important a part of it that the theme tune was the well-known Who song, 'Who are you?'

This sort of sums up where we are in today's gospel. We are doing much the same as last week, but from a different angle, last week Mark's this week John's. If you remember Mark began with no birth stories for Jesus but with the Old Testament and the Prophet Isaiah. Then the gospel would lead us on a trail of discovery of who Jesus was.

This time, with John, it is different. Just before today's gospel begins the whole gospel starts with, 'In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, the Word was God.' So instead of Isaiah or a birth, John says to us right away, 'This Jesus you are about to encounter is God.' His community had to be a fairly advanced one because this is both a bold statement and in poetic and difficult language. It raises immediate questions for the listener, 'What does it mean to be "the Word"?' 'What does it mean that he was there right at the start of everything?'

So if we think of CSI and their instruments of investigation, what is John going to use to tell us?

Firstly he is placing Jesus Christ right at the heart of creation 'with God' and 'as God'. So that sets the parameters, the area for our search into who Jesus is. Then he uses Isaiah and the Old Testament again as Mark did. Then he has, as CSI would appreciate, and who they usually have holed up in a hotel room, he has a witness. This word 'witness' will appear at the most significant parts of the gospel especially when John is talking about faith.

If we look at these, no other gospel makes it so clear and so soon that Jesus Christ is both human and divine, beginning, for the first time of all the gospels, with his divinity. To many people at the time the idea of someone being divine was not so odd. Emperors often said they were, Emperor Caligula said his favourite horse was. But no one claimed that they had been present at creation. John is revealing the Creator to us through Jesus. It places his incarnation, his becoming human, Christmas, at the heart of the whole creation story, of the whole life, plan, of what life itself is about and what its purpose is. It lifts the story of Jesus Christ beyond history and binds us to God himself and our origins and the origin of everything. Christ encompasses all.

With Isaiah, this quote in the first reading is from a later part than last week. It is when the Jews have got back to Jerusalem, or nearly so, and are in a celebratory mood. There is a sense of new life for the people contained in the quote, and it is just what Jesus will quote at the beginning of his ministry in Luke's gospel. There is a message of a new lease of life, of being unburdened by the things that had trapped them or held them down in the past, and the time has come, the appointed time, to reveal the Lord. It reveals the power of the Spirit.

Which takes us to the witness. They ask John, 'Who are you?' The disciples will ask Jesus just the same thing in a while. The gospel is an investigation and we have John as a witness to interrogate. He is very clear who he is and why he has come. 'To bear witness to the light.' (Jesus is both Word and Light. We can only use abstract images to try to understand him.)

But what is important in John's gospel is that our faith is going to be shown by our willingness to take on John the Baptist's roll in bearing witness to the Light ourselves. What the second reading makes clear as does the first reading, is that this will be impossible without the Holy Spirit. 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me!'

We do not doubt that Jesus was filled with the Spirit. What I think we do doubt sometimes is that we are. But the gospels are trying their best to help us discover that we are, or can be, if we enter into this life of the Son of God, who became one of us just to help us see this and make it possible for us. The question becomes not 'Who are you,' but with Jesus, 'Who am I?'