

OT: Isaiah 62:6-12**NT: Titus 3:4-7****Gp: Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20**

There was once a monk, one of the great monks who lived in the deserts of Egypt in the early Christian church. Someone – a spiritual seeker - went to him and asked, 'What good work shall I do?' And the monk answered, 'There is no single good work. The Bible says that Abraham was hospitable, and God was with him. And Elijah loved quiet, and God was with him. And David was humble, and God was with him. Therefore, find the desire God has placed in your heart, and do that, and guard your heart."

Find the desire God has placed in your heart.

This Christmas day, I'd like to invite you to reflect on those words, and ask: 'what desire has God placed in *my* heart?'

At this time of gifts, this is perhaps the greatest one of all: the gift of a heart full of desire and full of grace.

This is the heart we see in Mary. In this most familiar of stories, we find her: a young woman of no status, but with a heart open to receive the Word that God speaks to her. To let that Word take root in her. Mary gives flesh and form to the Word of God. She brings it into the world and offers it to us.

The angel hails Mary as full of grace. But she is no pushover. She questions. She shows courage, She sings and prophesies that the mighty will be cast down from their thrones. And she ponders all these things in her heart.

She finds the desire that God has placed within her heart, and she guards it.

Mary's specific role is unique. But she is also a believer like us, sister to our own faith. The Word God gifts to her is gifted to us. We too carry it within us. Mary's story is also our story.

The Word is God's own image, expression, wisdom. It is God's own heart, yearning to be one with ours. It is not words on a page, but a seed planted in the heart.

The Bible can bear witness to the Word of God, but the Word itself is more than the Bible. It is the way the invisible God is present to us. It is woven into the very fabric of creation. When you stop and stare at the outline of a tree against the low winter sun: then the Word

is speaking to you. When you are stopped in your tracks by the movement of a bird, the melody of a song, the touch of a loved one: then the Word is speaking to you. When people join hands to share love and sing of justice in the most impossible circumstances: then the Word is speaking to us all.

The Word is God present in creation. In every moment where truth is unveiled and beauty flares, that is the Word. For all things come into being in and through the Word.

And the highest expression of the Word must be love. A love that is personal. A love made flesh.

This is what Christians believe. That the Word of all creation is made flesh in Jesus. In his birth and life, in his cross and resurrection, he speaks to us: of healing, of the nearness of God, of a truth that steals away our pride and violence. He pours himself out for us to show us that might and power are not the way of salvation.

Jesus can do this because God has already planted a seed of grace in our hearts. We yearn for reality and love and peace. We long to overcome our divided and distorted lives – the greed, the indifference, the prejudice. That longing is the echo of God's Word. Lost, for a time. Corrupted by our fear. But still there. Always there. And waiting to be fanned into flame by the gift of the Word anew.

The Christmas story dramatizes that gift. Mary, full of grace, opens her heart, and in her heart she treasures and ponders all these things. And God is born in our midst. Not as a king in the world's eyes. Not a president or general. But as the child of an open heart and a worker's care.

We are invited to make Mary's story, the Christmas, story our own. To find the desire that God has placed within our heart, and guard it. That means: ponder it, question it, plumb its depths.

And – as the great monk said – 'There is no single good work'. There is no one way God calls us to be. The Word which speaks in the infinite variety of creation, speaks in the infinite variety of our humanity. The Christmas story revolves around a girl pregnant out of wedlock, foreign travellers, rough living shepherds. All of them bring their own unique gifts, their own hearts, to worship at the altar of the manger. To receive the gift of the Word, made fully human.

When God calls you, God calls you to live the deepest truth of your heart. Why else would God create us? God needs no puppets, needs nothing from us. God creates out of the sheer joy of giving and a longing for a love to return his own.

One of the things people worry about when thinking of Christianity is that it means that you have to submit yourself to an alien law; to a Bible treated as a set of timeless rules, to a church that claims power over your conscience. People worry it means denying their freedom, their sexuality, their intellect.

None of that should be true. God is not an alien law but the ground of your being, the core of your heart, the wisdom of your mind. You are created to experience the highest sort of freedom there is. You are not made for slavery.

Is this an easy way? A watered-down gospel? Not at all. To be the self we are created to be means letting go of the illusions and fears we are wrapped in. It means resisting idols of power and hate which reduce God's children to things to be exploited and killed. It means *living* the Word: not out of arrogance or false certainty, but in the courage of faith. The courage to be who God calls us to be.

This is what we celebrate today: the gift of God's heart to ours. The gift of our true being. It is what we celebrate here every Sunday, as we share the gifts of bread and wine, the living body and blood of God's Word.

So come to the altar of the manger this Christmas, where the Word is made flesh and given for us. And find it: find the desire God has placed in your heart.

Fr Steven Shakespeare