

John 1:1-18

The trouble with words

ForeWord

The playwright Dennis Potter once remarked, “The trouble with words is, you never know whose mouth they’ve been in.”

Our words are always second-hand. They come with fingerprints on them, with scratches and dirt. By their associations – by the other mouths which have uttered them – words always say more, carry more, than we intend or hear.

We hold our words in common, of course, otherwise they’re of no use to us. But they pass between us, *virus-like*, picked up, replayed, amplified, mutated, infected. And so some words even seem to require that the speaker utter a “trigger warning” before the main event – a kind of pre-word word. The warning flags words which might catch us unawares, upset us, cause us to spill over somehow, because of other mouths they’ve been in.

I’ve been wondering this week about the words which have flowed from the horror at Bondi Beach eleven days ago: “terrorism”, “Australia”, “community”, “hero”, “condemnation”, “innocence”, “antisemitism”, “protest”, “values”, “resistance”, “solidarity”. These seem to be the right words, but they are contested: What *is* a terrorist? What *is* antisemitism? What *are* our values? What *is* peace?

We understand why these words present themselves. Like ants from a nest upon which some tormenting child has jumped up and down a few times, we are suddenly darting around everywhere, grasping for understanding, out of both a recognition of the crisis and the sense that we must do, must say, something.

But we end up saying again the kinds of things one always says at times like this: words of sorrow, of comfort; words of pain, of condemnation; words of commitment and promise. And so, for all the necessity of such expression, our all too human, Large Language Model AI-like response kicks in with words we’ve all heard before: tired words, for dismal times.

This is our desperate – indeed truly hopeless (Latin: *de-sperare*) – attempt to wrap in words an experience which has to do with the very failure of words. For what is the violence of guns but precisely the bankruptcy of words – a swearing, a cursing, to signal an otherwise inexpressible hatred or frustration? And do not screams and tears indicate another failure of words to touch the truth, bodies now expressing what words cannot?

Words as law

We use words to grasp, to take hold, but they slip and fail us in this. Because, for our words truly to grasp, they have to be our own words only: fresh, not yet mouthed by others, and so still uninfected with other meanings which cause confusion.

And so, from despair that there might be no fresh words which could break everything open, we reach for the narrowest of words – the words of law: of commissions of inquiry, of prohibition of ownership and gatherings and certain slogans. Law seeks to exclude ambiguity and the risk inherent in having room to move. Law secures. Law is old words, the words of foundation, the rule according to which things should unfold.

Law says before we speak. It is the mouth that uttered our words before we came to say them for ourselves.

We need laws, of course. But if the trouble with words is that they've always already been in someone else's mouth, then we who imagine that we have "freedom of speech" have already been spoken before we speak. And so we say, and hear, nothing new, nothing truly free or liberating: merely law, untempered by grace. There is here, then, no penetration to the heart.

Perhaps all this seems rather dismal for Christmas Day! But Christmas is not the time for sentimental wishing away of hard things, for a forgetfulness of the realities of the world in which we live. Guns can menace at Hanukkah, bombs explode at Christmas, missiles rain down in Ramadan. Whatever we are doing *here, today*, it should not be a hiding from the world, a fearful withdrawal into the shadow of half-truths.

Because it's into precisely our space – the space of the human with its tainted, slipping words – that our Gospel text today speaks of a certain and unique annunciation, a certain en-mouthing, of [a] Word.

Most of us know this text pretty well – at least, its themes and rhythms. But let's listen again, towards hearing something new about words, and light, and life, and grace, and truth...

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ Hearing: John 1. 1-18)

Word: Proclamation

The Word among words

In the beginning, the Word.

Note that John doesn't declare, "In the beginning was 'a' word" but rather, *the* Word. It's "*word*", but not one word among many. And, being in the beginning, it's [a] pre-word Word – the first thing said – but now not as a trigger warning. *This* Word-before-all-words is not only the first thing said – the firing of a shot – it is also the last thing, the target. This untainted Word at the beginning remembers not each prior utterance to warn us of what's coming but remembers rather its *future*, final use – its purpose, which reaches not backwards for its meaning but forward.

This is the miracle of Christmas: that this child in the manger, this God on a cross, is a new language-ing of our words. By this, I mean that it poses a new and strange grammar for our old words. This grammar is new in that it joins the *wrong* kinds of things: the human to God, flesh to spirit, grace to law, death to life. It takes what is old, familiar, tired and worn out, and poetises it into something fresh, something new.

Christmas is the possibility of a new thing being said with old, overused words. When John declares that the Word became flesh, he's not making a statement about a mixing of God-stuff and world-stuff. He's talking about light flickering forth out of darkness. He's talking of order taking shape in chaos. He's talking about a resurrection of the dead, not at the end of the world but here and now, bringing new life and truth to stale words and the chaotic account they effect.

It is less that the Word becomes flesh than revivifies it, makes it alive again. Flesh itself – *our* flesh – now bears, *becomes*, the Word, becomes the location of grace and truth.

At least, this is the promise of Christmas, the promise of any decent talk of God's coming to the world which seeks truly to touch us, to make a difference.

The murders at Bondi unleashed a furore, as they should have. But, like all furores, this one will bring us no closer to grace and truth. We cannot agree on what our words mean, so many mouths have they filled. The furore is really about the words themselves. For this is the trouble with words: they are compromised: they pro-mise contradictory things in different mouths.

Our words are not inherently bad. They are stale. They retain a taste of truth, perhaps, but without grace. But it is the grace we need. It is grace which breaks through as light in darkness; as the sudden, overwhelming appearance of life in the midst of death; as the sur-prise of joy in the midst of despair.

It is of this grace and truth that John writes, identifying its possibility in the appearance of Jesus. We are here today not necessarily because we have *felt* much of this, or because we *have* this joy. This is part of the compromising of Christmas: that, these days, Christmas continually tells us that we *should* be joyful. We are here because we lack but still we long for relief, finally being ourselves but different, our words and actions made new, shifted from a staleness to fullness of life.

And so, we don't gather today merely to remember – if we even do that. Christmas, rather, poses a question: What would it look like if the fullness of life occurred not *despite* all that has happened to us or we feel will happen, but in the *form* of all that? What would it look like if what had been stale now tasted like the best we've ever tasted? What would it look like if we, with history's dirty fingerprints all over us, were nonetheless brought again to fullness of life?

Flesh becoming Word

This is what John means when he speaks of the Word become flesh: grace and truth in the midst of the whole catastrophe. The world *looks* the same – a baby in a cot, an innocent man murdered – but it *feels* different. And by “feel” I don't mean to return to mere sentiment or a denial of the hurt the world often is. “Feel” means, here, a re-entry into our compromised words, but now struggling in speech and action against the confusion all around: grace and truth against law and compromise.

This is not an easy calling. In Jesus' case, it leads to the cross, and it might feel like that for us, as well. But, one way or another, God kills us all in the end, and so the question is really only, What should we say and do until that time, what shall we *be*?

Seeing what Christ is, coming into the world, let us seek to be what he is and what he makes possible: Light. Life. Grace. Truth: the unfolding of the very heart of God in the midst of a compromised and contradictory world.

This is the gift, and the call, of Christmas.
