

Christians in Government Whitehall Carol Service
WESTMINSTER ABBEY
Wednesday 7th December 2011

The Address

by

Right Reverend Sandy Millar
Honorary Assistant Bishop, Diocese of London

St John chapter 1 verse 1...."In the beginning was the Word, the Word was *with* God, and the Word was *God*"

Some of you may remember the story of the man desperately hanging on to the roof of his house as the floods rose higher and higher.....a rowing boat went past offering to help..."no, no, God is going to rescue me...." a motor boat ...the same response...finally a helicopter"no, no" he shouted ..God is going to rescue me. He drowned and when in heaven he complained ...God said to him..."what more could I do?...I sent two boats and a helicopter and you refused to be rescued".

The Bible is a rescue book .. and as we celebrate this year the 400th anniversary of the King James Version we thank God for the faith and vision of our ancestors who saw these pages as containing not just beautiful phrases and poetry but the Living Word of God, and in providing the story of God's plan in language accessible to all in their time...in the providence of God, set a standard of Public life, Government and Culture that gave us as our inheritance Christian capital that we have been living off ever since. And now.....it is running out...so where do we go from here?

St John assumes that we remember the historical details, the manger, the Shepherds, the Wise Men ... after a lifetime of walking with God.....*he* is concerned that we should understand who Jesus was .. and is ... he calls him the Word meaning of course "everything we can say about God" rather as we would say that Bio-logos (the Word he uses for Word) is everything we can say about bio or life.

With characteristic brevity he tells us three things about him all of which put together make it clear that Jesus is *totally* unique ... there is no one remotely comparable to him

FIRST of all...there never was a time when Jesus didn't exist. In the beginning was the Word. Of course He wasn't called Jesus until he came to earth and allowed Himself to be born as a baby ... but He was there at Creation and even before.

SECONDLY... He was *with* God ... and that relationship that He has with the Creator of the Universe is the key to understanding .. ourselves .. our world ...and the situation that we find ourselves in today.

One of the things of which I am most proud .. if a clergyman is allowed to be proud ... is that the Alpha Course ... the introductory course to the Christian faith that is now running in 165 countries all over the world, in every continent, translated into over forty languages ... is running in 85% of the prisons in this country. One of those who did it in Dartmoor wrote this in his bible (actually on his map of Jerusalem in Old Testament times for which I think he had probably a rather limited use.....) "...something amazing happened tonight...I came back from the Alpha group and prayed to you Lord.....and for the first time you felt real to me...and I honestly in my heart felt your presence and you answered my prayer straight away...because I picked up my bible and read a large

portion...but as soon as I opened it... it said we are not alone....and it made perfect sense....I am writing this down to remember your first words to me....as I am truly touched in my heart...and as I read it you need to have a personal relationship with you Lord.".....the spelling is not good...but the theology is perfect. At the heart of the Universe is a loving God who longs for a personal relationship with each of us...with you...and with me.

THIRDLY The Word...was God. For a number of years I was on the Board of Visitors at Holloway Prison.I went into a cell one day...there were four young women in it and one of them proudly invited me to look at the notice board on which her birthday card ...she only had one...was pinned. I read the message on the card...it said very simply "we wish things could have worked out differently...butall my love... Dad." I said to her..."you know...God could have written that..". "We wish things could have worked out differently .. but...all my love..."

The problems that we face...and they are many... are not primarily to be expressed in economical terms, or sociological terms.....or, dare I say...ecological terms...but theological...terms. We have turned our backs on God and are reaping the consequences. If you go to the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral you will see a monument to Sir Stafford Cripps .. Chancellor of the Exchequer...who died in 1952. On it is a quotation from him..."If a man neglects the things of the Spirit and puts aside the armour of God he will seal the doom of future generations." The converse, by God's grace is true as well.

Three thousand years ago King Solomon had observed that .."greed causes fighting; trusting the Lord leads to prosperity." Proverbs 28:25.

Because the baby in the manger grew up, he revealed Himself to be God in His short life here.... He went to the Cross and on one hand He took every sin that ever had been committed and...on the other hand He took every sin that ever would be committed ...and with a shout of triumph he proclaimed...IT IS FINISHED.....and we are told that God was in Christ...reconciling Himself to the world.....and as St John puts it "to all who received Him...to them he gave the power to become children of God"to take their place in the world to join the millions2.1 billions worldwide...who are not ashamed to say that they are followers of the Living Christ, working for reconciliation, being catalysts for love instead of hate, forgiveness instead of revenge, hope instead of despair, friends of the poor and voices for those without a voice both in public life and in the communities in which we have been set.....of which, if I may say so, Baroness Cox's charity Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust working mainly in so-called Third World countries is a wonderful example of what can be achieved ... and we will be invited to support it in our offering on the way out tonight.

These followers of the living Christ have traditionally been known as the Church and at this critical time in the life of our country it would be good to recognise what an essential contribution is made by them, to join them if we haven't and to support them in every way we can both publicly and privately. I recognise that for some that will take courage and determination....perhaps the stuff of New Year resolutions.

The Word...that was in the beginning, was with God and was God ... JESUS... became flesh and dwelt among us ...or as the Message translation puts it so graphically ... moved into the neighbourhood ... He's here.

Now...this Christmas .. I don't know what you may make of all this. Many of you, perhaps all of you, will be thinking...of course...I have this relationship that the prisoner was talking about... that's why I am here... singing praises in my heart, celebrating once again this .. what C.S.Lewis called the "central event in the history of the earth...the very thing the whole story has been about." ..

But this is not an easy age to maintain faith and there may be some here who are hinking...well...I'm not so sure...but I would like to find out... if I can... a bit more about it. May I encourage you as warmly as I can to consider going on the Alpha Course...there is one run by the Christians in Government starting in January ... details are on their website...it is simply an opportunity to explore the meaning of life in an atmosphere where you can ask any question or say any thing without being made to look stupid or feel guilty.....many people today are accustomed to going on courses .. on hang gliding, or computers...so why not a course on God?

But there may be one person here tonight who says "I can't wait for that...I want to respond now...and I am going to end with a prayer which, if you would like to you could echo in the silence of your heart...it would be what St John calls in this chapter "...receiving Him..."...inviting Him into your heart...like He came willingly into the stable and however unprepared you may feel and however unsuitable our heart may seem for the Son of God He has promised if you want Him.....this Christmas...."I'll come and join you"

As we sit...here then is the prayer.....