

## Homily 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Christmas 2021

'Great teachers are immortal, they never die!. These were the very wise words of a colleague of mine some years ago and it is so true. Hugh McGibbon was my English teacher for 5 years at secondary school and from the age of 12 he instilled within me a great passion for the English Language, literature and poetry in particular. Hugh is dead now but in my heart he never did die but he lives on in my love of the written word. Hugh's favourites were poems by Owen, Elliott and Betjeman, which brought home the reality and the harshness of human existence and these particularly appealed to me in English lessons at school. One such poem is the stark reality of Christmas by the John Betjeman, Poet Laureate, without the sugar-coating or superficiality which often accompanies the Christmas Season:

### John Betjeman-Christmas

The bells of waiting Advent ring,  
The Tortoise stove is lit again  
And lamp-oil light across the night  
Has caught the streaks of winter rain  
In many a stained-glass window sheen  
From Crimson Lake to Hookers Green.

The holly in the windy hedge  
And round the Manor House the yew  
Will soon be stripped to deck the ledge,  
The altar, font and arch and pew,  
So that the villagers can say  
'The church looks nice' on Christmas Day.

Provincial Public Houses blaze,  
Corporation tramcars clang,  
On lighted tenements I gaze,  
Where paper decorations hang,  
And bunting in the red Town Hall  
Says 'Merry Christmas to you all'.

And London shops on Christmas Eve  
Are strung with silver bells and flowers  
As hurrying clerks the City leave  
To pigeon-haunted classic towers,  
And marbled clouds go scudding by  
The many-steepled London sky.

And girls in slacks remember Dad,  
And oafish louts remember Mum,  
And sleepless children's hearts are glad.  
And Christmas-morning bells say 'Come!'  
Even to shining ones who dwell  
Safe in the Dorchester Hotel.

And is it true,  
This most tremendous tale of all,  
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,  
A Baby in an ox's stall?  
The Maker of the stars and sea  
Become a Child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is,  
No loving fingers tying strings  
Around those tissueed fripperies,  
The sweet and silly Christmas things,  
Bath salts and inexpensive scent  
And hideous tie so kindly meant,

No love that in a family dwells,  
No carolling in frosty air,  
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells  
Can with this single Truth compare -  
That God was man in Palestine  
And lives today in Bread and Wine.

The Prologue of St John's Gospel (Jn1:1-18) is a summary of the main theology of the evangelist's account of the Life of Christ. John does not sugar coat the entrance of Jesus on the world-stage but offers us the stark reality that not all people recognise or accepted the Jesus as Saviour. The Prologue too is very poetic full short phrases full of symbolic meaning with the main message contained in the middle of the text, a feature of ancient chiasmic structure. 'In the beginning was the Word....' reminds us of Jesus' presence at the beginning of time as proclaimed by the Book of Genesis. John goes on to say that 'the Word was with God and the Word was God...' stating Jesus' equality with God the Creator and Father. Just as the Word is the creative power of God so Jesus is the giver of 'grace and truth' which come into being through Christ. It is through the Word that we also receive 'life and light' eternal life and a light that the darkness cannot overcome. St John goes on to clarify the status of The Baptist 'who was not the light but one who testified to the light', present from all ages who now takes 'flesh and dwells (sets up his tent) amongst us'. Yet that Word made flesh is accepted by few and rejected by many, both Jews and Gentiles. To those who do accept Him however, 'is given the authority to be called the children of God' because they are 'born of God'. Thus the he main point emerging in the middle of the Prologue is that all who hear the Gospel message of Christ's coming into the world are offered a **choice** to either accept or reject, to **believe or deny** but those who do believe truly become the children of God and inherit eternal life. Disciples of Jesus must, according to St John, believe in The Incarnate Christ and in believing enter into a personal relationship with Jesus as our personal Lord and Saviour.

Like Hugh McGibbon, like John Betjeman St John doesn't wish to sugar-coat the The Incarnation but offers us the stark reality of **choice**. Each of us are called today, during this holy season of Christmas, to **choose** to either **accept or reject** to **believe or deny** the Word who offers us, not magic solutions to our many and sometimes heavy challenges on life's pilgrimage, but the 'authority to be called children of God' and the inheritors of 'eternal life', a message of hope that is borne out of a personal love of Christ our Lord and Saviour. Oh Patrick Morgan, my Deputy Head, was indeed a wise man when he said: 'Great teachers are immortal, they never die!' St John was one such great teacher.