

## **Christmas Eve – December 24, 2015**

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Words are powerful and can convey many messages. Let me demonstrate—as I say these words, be aware of what comes into your mind...

“May the force be with you.”

“Houston, we have a problem”

“Because its 2015”

Words: those of us who work with words—writers, preachers, and teachers know how careful we need to be in finding the right words to say. Whether we’re at the bedside of someone we love in the hospital or listening to a friend unfold the troubles they’ve known, what was say and how we say it can make all the difference.

It was an archivist who really taught me about this: it was during a national council meeting of the Anglican Church when the members were concluding a debate on a controversial subject and discussing the resolution: there were amendments and amendments to amendments many of which were dealing with punctuation or choice of words. I was getting increasingly frustrated and expressing that frustration to my archivist friend, who leaned over to me and gently said, “When they get to debating punctuation and grammar, you know that something really important is at stake and they’re seeking to get it right.” I’ve never regarded a debate the same way again: it was another learning of the importance of words.

We know that words can hurt and words can heal. Who hasn’t had the experience of having our feelings hurt because of words spoken to us in a moment of anger or disappointment; similarly who hasn’t had a moment where a gentle word spoken lovingly can be like balm to the soul?

I remember years ago when I was feeling particularly raw because of some words spoken to me, and had retreated into my home feeling sorry for myself, a friend came to the door, said, “I’ve brought nothing with me, it’s just me and I want to be with you while you sort this out.” It made all the difference. Not that the hurt was taken away, it still can come in sometimes bidden and unbidden ways, but in that moment, it was just a gentle word spoken and a presence that made life worth living again.

Think of how simple words spoken in the right context can be so powerful: when a refugee family hears the words, “you’ve been granted admission to Canada”, when a street identified person hears the words, ‘here’s your new address-it can be your home for as long as you want.’ Or the patient who hears the words, “you’re now cancer free—come back and see me in 5 years.

So if the words we use to communicate with each other are this important, how much more important are the words that we use to address the eternal mystery we call God, and the words that God uses to address us.

The prologue to John's gospel says, "The word was made flesh and dwelt among us." The letter to the Hebrews says, "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word."

Christmas is about how the mystery we call God took on human flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. But, as Franciscan priest Richard Rohr reminds us, John's prologue takes us not so much to Bethlehem as to the very origins of the universe at the beginning of time. Father Rohr writes, "The Big Bang is really the first moment of Incarnation before Jesus even took on human flesh. God takes shape in colour, movement, shape and texture—incarnate and present in each living thing. From the moment of our universe's inception, along the slow stages of evolution and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we see that life is headed somewhere good. We can trust that death simply brings new forms of Love making itself known." [1]

Love making itself known. That's what Christmas is about. It's why tonight's first reading sounds the theme of peace. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news" sings Isaiah—and the word made flesh is the one who announces the peace that passes all understanding. He is the Prince of Peace, the one who called the peacemakers blessed, the one who guides our feet into the ways of peace. In a world torn apart by conflict, in time of terrorism and gun violence we can hear afresh the beautiful words of Isaiah as we long for peace in our time.

God's incarnate Word Jesus Christ speaks words of peace and words that call us to remember that we are loved and accepted just as we are. Journalist Ian Brown's profile of Jean Vanier in Saturday's Globe and Mail [2] described the humility and humanity Vanier's life and commitment to people who live with mental disabilities. In the article Brown quotes Vanier saying this, "So, the greatest thing to calm anguish is the knowledge that we are loved. Not for what we do or have done or for what we will do, but in ourselves. The more we lose, the more we come close to the reality of what it is to be human. Which is to accept our weaknesses, to discover that you are beautiful."

Each one of us is God's beloved—God's beloved daughters and sons—because in the incarnation of God in Jesus human life has been sanctified, made holy. We act this out in this celebration of Holy Communion when we receive Christ in the bread and wine and ingest his very life into ours, making us holy not for what we do or have done but simply because of being human. And if this is true—and Christmas affirms that it is, then how we speak to each, how we use words to heal rather than to wound—this becomes the way that we can be instruments of God's great dream for a world of peace and justice and freedom.

Lee Johnson is a Vancouver poet, a professor of English Literature at UBC, and every year he writes a Christmas poem that he sends to his friends. This year's poem called Blue Shadows celebrates the language of the earth's oldest words silently spoken by rocks and stones. Like Richard Rohr, he imagines

the incarnation of God expressed in the beauty of the earth and sea. And near the end of the poem, he recalls a time, in childhood, playing in the snow—he writes,

We make snow-angels, laughing in our glory,  
Seeing our breath, attended by blue shadows  
Shimmering across the snow beyond our notice,  
For we, being young, are wrapped up in ourselves;  
Time breaks us down, but we at last shape words  
To show our place among the rocks and trees:  
And above all, how light seeks out dark shadows  
With heaven's blue, responsive to the Presence  
Of thought shaping a language out of light,  
Like angels from not-time in love with time.

Thought, shaping a language out of light: the word became flesh and dwelt among us. May that Word be behind every word you think and speak this night and in the year to come.

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[1]From Richard Rohr's letter November 2015 sent from the Center for Action and Contemplation, P.O> Box 12464, Albuquerque N.M.

[2] <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/jean-vaniers-comfort-and-joy-find-the-places-of-hope/article27842806/>