

## *It's A Heart Thing*

The writing of words can be an art form - or a car crash. And where it is not a car crash it can often be clumsy, wordy and unclear.

The year just closing marks the 90th anniversary of a small book that had a big impact. Sir Earnest Gowers is associated with *Plain Words: A Guide to the Use of English*. It was published in 1948 and aimed at the wordily incontinent civil servants of his day, but his first challenge to bad writing was in 1929 in a publication called *Mainly About the King's English*.

His book and its revisions have had a tremendous impact, and far beyond the Civil Service, and became popular best sellers. Its latest revision has been undertaken by his great-granddaughter.

Ernest Gowers said '*Be short, be simple, be human*'. He had in mind the written word, but it applies to speech too, of course. **It's a shame his advice was not available to the authors of the collection of books we call The Bible. A good deal of which is pretty wordy, even rambling. But not tonight's gospel reading, just proclaimed.**

**Often called the 'prologue' of the Gospel of John, it is widely known and valued and always at the front of the queue on an occasion like this. It is a brilliant example of a concise expression of an overwhelmingly heady claim: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.***

The Christian Year has two great force fields, in **some ways rather like those of the Earth's North and South Poles: everything happens between and**

within them, and is affected by them even though we are unaware of their presence or significance.

For Christians, the Christmas commemoration of the birth of Jesus, and the Holy Week and Easter commemoration of his trial, death and resurrection, form the two great poles of the Christian life and the Christian imagination, the two great force fields which, between them, hold the heart of the story and energise it. Sure, these force fields are not measurable or provable in the same way as the **earth's magnetic forces are, but nonetheless exercise considerable power over countless people and cultures across the ages.**

**If you are scientifically minded, you'll say that in making this parallel I'm not comparing like with like. That's true. Yet our lives are likely to present us with some claims that are measurable by scientific method and some that aren't; things which, we might say, require investigation by the heart and conscience: maybe less accurately calibrated than a magnetometer (the thing used to measure magnetic forces) but in some ways more profoundly calibrated.**

How to measure the claims made by Christmas; **that's** the challenge. Not everyone is interested in this. But some are. And sometimes a new seriousness about these matters erupts within our lives, unexpectedly. You never know when wonder, love or loss will strike, and when they do, perspectives shift and new questions arise.

I am sure you have had times when you discover how tricky it is to reliably remember an event, or what was said. Or when different witnesses have conflicting recollections.

Consider, then, the consensus that the four Gospels that found their way into the New Testament were written between the years 66 and 110, way, way

after the events of which they speak. Before that, they had been circulating as spoken stories. Stories spoken are analogue, not digital, and often change in the telling. And so it is necessary to approach them with intelligent scepticism, to see the dangers of taking them literally and to seek, instead, their *meaning*.

Was it a stable? Some scholars say that is unlikely. Were there three Magi? Only Matthew mentions them and does not say how many. Did it happen at this time of year? Almost certainly not.

**Let's leave all that. The hour is late. We have what we have in the gospels, and on top of that we have a great deal of cultural accretions about Christmas which, frankly, only get in the way (we've sung some of those already and we shall sing some more before the season is out).**

What, then, are the aspects we should give our attention to, about the thing we are celebrating here, now, and which might help us see through the clutter and glimpse the meaning (maybe better to **say meanings**) of **Jesus' birth**?

First, that when John speaks of *The Word*, it is much more than the word (and words) spoken of by Sir Ernest Gowers. As John uses it, the Word underpins everything, *is* everything. Nothing is beyond its reach. Nothing is distinct from it. Nothing exists beyond it. The Word is God.

And, outrageously, the Word became flesh.

It became incarnate in human form. Arrived via a **women's pregnancy. Developed from a one-celled embryo to a complex multicellular baby.** God made an incursion into our material lives by being born in a child. Born as one of us. The divine and the material become friends.

Second, according to the stories – and even allowing for the unreliability of transmission over time – some counter-intuitive aspects persistently endure in the telling: born to an unmarried teenage woman; in an unvalued corner of an occupied nation; a birth announced only to marginals and outsiders of various kinds; a birth in unflashy conditions.

Maybe these aspects are simply just too familiar, and **we don't see the message of them. Yet they serve, as it were, as God's CV: this is the kind of God I am; this is my approach; these are my concerns; this is how I operate.**

Third, because God became so intimately involved in human affairs, we have permission to be fully human. *Do any of us know what that might mean?* I'm doubtful, **not because we're stupid (mostly we aren't) but because we are ignorant, we don't know, and we're often fearful.**

So whatever else you might study or contemplate, be sure, please, never to cease from exploring what it might require of you to become fully human, for that is what the Incarnation of Christ requires of you.

**Fourth, this Feast of Christ's birth celebrates God's astonishing gift of God's-self to humankind.** That is the template, the model, the example. We should, then, (we really should) be absurdly and recklessly generous in making a gift of ourselves to one another: a gift of our time, attention, love, presence, work, skills, our lives.

**And finally, look out for God's DNA all over the place.** This is not about church or being religious. Its implications race wildly beyond anything **remotely 'religious': the consequences of the Incarnation bolt out of all quaint religious stables, just as they did out of the archetypal stable in Bethlehem.**

And they know no bounds; they press upon every aspect of life from our words and conversation, the work of our hands, our fantasies, our loves and estrangements, our possessions and patterns of consumption, our treatment of insiders and outsiders, the exercise of our personal power and influence, our approach to the planet and the other forms of life we have the honour to share it with.

Oh, and the proper care of ourselves. We must not forget this: to take seriously the Incarnation means also, in addition to these generosity towards others and the material world, generosity towards our own **souls and minds and bodies. How often we don't do that.**

*Why this divine gift to humankind which we now celebrate and proclaim?* The only answer can so easily seem too easy: *For love's sake.* There, get your magnetometer around that. It won't register a thing. Why? Well, because it's a heart thing.

*'And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.'* Amen.