

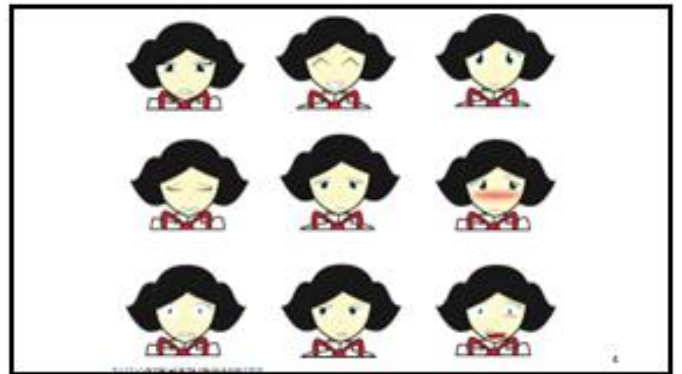
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Sunday 17th December – Carol Service – Rev Alison Bruton

I'll start with a question...how well do you understand English grammar or, as it is perhaps better known in schools nowadays, literacy? When I was at school, many years ago, I remember learning about nouns, verbs and adjectives; I might just about recall what an adverb is now but I'm afraid that's just about it. Not long ago when I was a governor in a primary school and was invited in to see some of the teaching, I was amazed to find that in literacy sessions the class was learning about things such as conjunctions, the present perfect form of verbs and fronted adverbials. By the time it got to years 5 and 6 I saw lessons on passive verbs, expanded noun phrases and modal verbs; none of which I would have any hope of explaining to you but I'm sure that some of the younger people here tonight might be well able to do so.

So why talk about literacy at a Carol Service? Well, in our readings this evening we have heard that God has changed our understanding of grammar and has done strange things with a noun, an object or thing kind of word, making it more like a doing word, a verb. The Word that came at Christmas is not just an object but rather, in the person of Jesus, he is active and certainly commanded the attention of those who met him when he grew up.

So what is this 'doing' aspect of the Word that I've referred to? When we write or say a word or words what we are doing is communicating, expressing how we feel perhaps. I carry around in my purse a note that one of my children wrote to me when they were quite young, bearing in mind all three are in their thirties now. **SLIDE 1** Here's a picture of the note, it is very precious to me as you can imagine (...just a thought to the younger ones here, doing something like that can really make your adults at home happy). In a sense, the Christmas story is God's self-communication to the world, and just like the note I carry in my purse, the message God is sending is one of love. The rather big note from God that we might not be able to fit in our purse is the Bible, and in our reading from John that we heard earlier we see in v14 that 'the Word became flesh and lived among us'. This was God communicating with the world, demonstrating his love for his creation and, in particular, for each one of us here this evening. So, we don't just have a note to carry around, but a living and breathing person who demonstrated that love. In the same way, if I had never experienced the love of my children in a real and human way, the note I carry would not have the same meaning. As it is, the note reminds me of the love my children have for me and the love I have for them. The readings we have heard this evening are also notes that we can carry with us to remind us of the love God has for us.

So, aside from words, how can we communicate with each other? I've got some pictures to give us some ideas:

SLIDE 2 – Pictures

God uses the beauty of creation to communicate with us, to show us how much he cares for us. For our part, we should then be thinking of how best to care for this wonderful world we have been given to care for and also to listen carefully to what God is saying to us through what we see around us in nature and in one another.

SLIDE 3 –Texting/letters

I've mentioned my note in my purse, nowadays that might well have been sent by text. In the same way there are short 'texts' in the Bible that sum up what God wants us to know about him, possibly the best one I know is 'God is love' (1 John 4:16). There are parts of the Bible, in the New Testament, which are actually called letters, where people write about the Good News of Jesus to others who are far away.

SLIDE 4 – Facial expression

Our faces give a lot away don't they, we can show we're happy, sad, grumpy surprised...just with our faces. The good thing is that if we turn to God, we will see a face of love looking back at us, much like when a new parent looks into the eyes of their newborn child.

SLIDE 5 – Road signs

Road signs tell us the way to go, how fast we should be going and how we should act towards others on the road. In the same way, when we read the Bible, particularly looking at the life of Jesus we see the way we should go and how to behave towards those around us. There were people in the Old Testament called prophets who showed the way to God, our second reading from Isaiah does just that, it tells us that Jesus would come into the world.

So, all of these images have shown us how we communicate with each other and coming back to the Christmas story and the readings and poems we have heard, these are just a way that God is using to communicate with us, telling us that he loves us.

If we think about the word 'Word' in a literacy sense we would most likely class it as a noun, a thing, something written on a page. But the Word we have heard about this evening that has come into the world is not just an object that can be ignored or put in a cupboard so that it doesn't get in our way. Neither is it something written on a page that we can cross out, erase, or somehow obliterate. Rather, this Word is active in the person of Jesus; he cannot be shut away or got rid of; he calls upon us to respond to him and to the message of the Gospel.

So, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas let's remember the message, the Word, that God is sending to us, the word made flesh in the form of a tiny baby, to live among us and to demonstrate just how much God loves us. Literacy has been turned on its head...a noun has become a verb. Whatever next?

Amen