
The Most Important Word

John 1.1-14

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 24, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I want to describe to you three scenes that I'm guessing will be familiar to everyone here tonight. And then I want to think with you about what these three scenes have in common.

The first is your relationship with the most difficult member of your family. Let's say it's your father. You spend some time in the stores after Thanksgiving and you find presents for most of your friends and colleagues and family. But somehow you have no idea what to give your father. It bothers you because deep down it feels like your inability to know what present will make your father happy is symbolic of your lifelong confusion about what might truly make your father happy, especially where you're concerned. So in the end you spend more than you meant to on something you don't really believe he wants, pathetically trying to throw money at the problem but inwardly cursing yourself because you know that what you're buying isn't the answer. When Christmas Day comes and your father opens the present, you see in his forced smile and his half-hearted hug of thanks that you've failed yet again to do something for him that might overcome the chasm between you.

Here's a second scene. You have family or friends from out of town coming for Christmas. You want everything to be perfect for them and you exchange a flurry of emails about who's going to sleep where, and whether it's all right for them to bring the dog. You get into a frenzy of shopping and baking, and you're actually a little anxious that you'll forget something or burn something, so the kitchen becomes your empire, and you can't bear for someone to interrupt you, and even at Christmas dinner you're mostly checking the gravy or reheating the carrots, and as you say goodbye to them you hug and say, "It's such a shame we never really talked while you were here," and, when they've finally left, you collapse in a heap, maybe in tears of exhaustion.

Here's a third scene. You feel there's something empty or lacking in the cozy Christmas with family and friends, and your heart is breaking for people having a tough time in the cold, in isolation, in poverty or in grief. So you gather together presents for children of prisoners or turn all your Christmas gifts into vouchers representing your support of a house or a cow or two buffaloes for people who need the resources more than you and your friends do.

What do all these scenes have in common? I want to suggest to you that they're all based on one tiny word: it's the word, "for." When we care about those for whom Christmas is a tough time, we want to do something "for" them. When we want our houseguests to enjoy their Christmas visit, our impulse is to spend our whole time doing things "for" them, whether cooking dinner or constantly clearing the house or arranging activities to keep them busy. When we feel our relationship with our father is faltering, our instinct is to do something "for" him that somehow melts his heart and makes everything all right.

And those gestures of "for" matter because they sum up a whole life in which we try to make relationships better, try to make the world better, try to be better people ourselves by doing things "for" people. We praise the selflessness of those who spend their lives doing things "for" people. People still sign letters "Your obedient servant," because we want to tell each other "I'm eager to do things 'for' you." When we feel noble we hum Art Garfunkel singing "Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down..." – presumably "for" you to walk over me without getting your dainty feet wet. When we feel romantic we put on the husky voice and turn into Bryan Adams singing "Everything I do – I do it 'for' you."

It seems that the word that epitomizes being an admirable person, the word that sums up the spirit of Christmas, is "for." We cook "for," we buy presents "for," we offer charity "for," all to say we lay ourselves down "for." But there's a problem here. All these gestures are generous, and kind, and in some cases sacrificial and noble. They're good gestures, warm-hearted, admirable gestures. But somehow they don't go to the heart

of the problem. You give your father the gift, and the chasm still lies between you. You wear yourself out in showing hospitality, but you've never actually had the conversation with your loved ones. You make fine gestures of charity, but the poor are still strangers to you. "For" is a fine word, but it doesn't dismantle resentment, it doesn't overcome misunderstanding, it doesn't deal with alienation, it doesn't overcome isolation.

Most of all, "for" isn't the way God celebrates Christmas. God doesn't set the world right at Christmas. God doesn't shower us with good things at Christmas. God doesn't mount up blessings upon us and then get miserable and stropy when we open them all up and fail to be sufficiently excited or surprised or grateful. "For" isn't what God shows us at Christmas.

In some ways we wish it was. We'd love God to make everything happy and surround us with perfect things. When we get cross with God, it's easy to feel God isn't keeping this side of the bargain – to do things "for" us now and forever.

But God shows us something else at Christmas. God speaks a rather different word. The angel says to Joseph, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'" And then in John's gospel, we get the summary statement of what Christmas means: "The Word became flesh and lived with us." It's an unprepossessing little word, but this is the word that lies at the heart of Christmas and at the heart of the Christian faith. The word is "with."

Think back to the very beginning of all things. John's gospel says, "The Word was with God. He was in the beginning with God. Without him not one thing came into being." In other words, before anything else, there was a "with." The "with" between God and the Word, or as Christians came to call it, between the Father and the Son. "With" is the most fundamental thing about God. And then think about how Jesus concludes his ministry. His very last words in Matthew's gospel are, "Behold, I am with you always." In other words, there will never be a time when I am not "with." And at the very end of the Bible, when the book of Revelation describes the final disclosure of God's everlasting destiny, this is what the voice from heaven says: "Behold, the home of God is with mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them."

We've stumbled upon the most important word in the Bible – the word that describes the heart of God and the nature of God's purpose and destiny for us. And that word is "with." That's what God was in the very beginning, that's what God sought to instil in the creation of all things, that's what God was looking for in making the covenant with Israel, that's what God coming among us in Jesus was all about, that's what the sending of the Holy Spirit meant, that's what our destiny in the company of God will look like. It's all in that little word "with." God's whole life and action and purpose are shaped to be "with" us.

In a lot of ways, "with" is harder than "for." You can do "for" without a conversation, without a real relationship, without a genuine shaping of your life to accommodate and incorporate the other. The reason your Christmas present for your father is doomed is not because "for" is wrong, not because there's anything bad about generosity; it's because the only solution is for you and your father to be "with" each other long enough to hear each others' stories and tease out the countless misunderstandings and hurts that have led your relationship beyond the point of being rescued by the right Christmas present. The reason why you collapse in tears when your guests have gone home is because the hard work is finding out how you can share the different responsibilities and genuinely be "with" one another in the kitchen and elsewhere that make a stay of several nights a joy of "with" rather than a burden of "for." What makes attempts at Christmas charity seem a little hollow is not that they're not genuine and helpful and kind but that what isolated and grieving and impoverished people usually need is not gifts or money but the faithful presence "with" them of someone who really cares about them as a person. It's the "with" they desperately want, and the "for" on its own (whether it's food, presents or money) can't make up for the lack of that "with."

But we all fear the “with,” because the “with” seems to ask more of us than we can give. We’d all prefer to keep charity on the level of “for,” where it can’t hurt us. We all know that more families struggle over Christmas than any other time. Maybe that’s because you can spend the whole year being busy and doing things “for” your family, but when there’s nothing else to do but be “with” one another you realize that being “with” is harder than doing “for” – and sometimes it’s just too hard. Sometimes New Year comes as a relief as we can go back to doing “for” and leave aside being “with” for another year.

And that’s why it’s glorious, almost incredible, good news that God didn’t settle on “for.” At Christmas God said unambiguously, “I am ‘with’.” Behold, my dwelling is among you. I’ve moved into the neighborhood. I will be “with” you always. My name is Emmanuel, God “with” us. Sure, there was an element of “for” in Jesus’ life. He was “for” us when he healed and taught, he was “for” us when he died on the cross, he was “for” us when he rose from the grave and ascended to heaven. These are things that only God can do and we can’t do. But the power of these things God did “for” us lies in that they were based on his being “with” us. God has not abolished “for.” But God, this night, in becoming flesh in Jesus, has said *there will never again be a “for” that’s not based on a fundamental, unalterable, everlasting, and utterly unswerving “with.”* That’s the good news of Christmas.

And how do we celebrate this good news? By being “with” people in poverty and distress even when there’s nothing we can do “for” them. By being “with” people in grief and sadness and loss even when there’s nothing to say. By being “with” and listening to and walking with those we find most difficult rather than trying to fob them off with a gift or a face-saving gesture. By being still “with” God in silent prayer rather than rushing in our anxiety to do yet more things “for” God. By taking an appraisal of all our relationships and asking ourselves, “Does my doing “for” arise out of a fundamental commitment to be “with,” or is my doing “for” driven by my profound desire to avoid the discomfort, the challenge, the patience, the loss of control involved in being “with”?”

No one could be more tempted to retreat into doing “for” than God. God, above all, knows how exasperating, ungrateful, thoughtless and self-destructive company we can be. Most of the time we just want God to fix it, and spare us the relationship. But that’s not God’s way. God could have done it all on his own. But he chose not to. He chose to do it “with” us. Even though it cost him the cross. That’s the wonder of Christmas. That’s the amazing news of the word “with.”