Midnight Eucharist 2016

So – this is the bit with no music – just words!
I wonder what you’re expecting – a thought-for-the-day-sort-of-a-moment…
a new idea… a bit of stand-up… a Christmas greeting… a word of truth,
maybe…?
Given that the Oxford English Dictionary’s latest new word is ‘post-truth’ that
puts me, as the preacher, in a rather precarious position.
The word ‘post-truth’ has been coined to express where we’re ‘at’ this year in
situations such a Brexit and Trump, in which supposedly objective facts have
utterly failed to impact on public opinion… with the result that our world
seems cut loose in the mêlée of rampant populism or unbridled establishment
bashing.
But perhaps this not such a new phenomenon. Pontius Pilate, the man who
sentenced Jesus Christ to death by crucifixion is reported to have said “What
is truth?” Perhaps we’re just saying it in a more sophisticated way. What are
facts? What counts as objective these days? The last similar crisis to sweep
through philosophy and the social sciences was ‘Post-modernism’. This was
when the previous set of ideas about how we construct truth ran into
difficulty. How do we know? How can we trust? What do we believe? At what
point does language begin to let us down? What are we meant to do when we
can’t find a way to express what we truly believe and what we feel is
important, without running the risk of it being dismissed as mere sentiment, or
worse?
This set of questions has been around for a long, long time… at least 2000
years. You’ve only got to look at the four Gospels, Matthew Mark, Luke and
John and ask how these four different men, with different cultural backgrounds,
from different walks of life, dealt with recording what they had witnessed in
the life of the man called Jesus of Nazareth… and, for example, how they tell
of his birth.
Matthew – a Jew – writes about it through the actions of a carpenter called
Joseph, and an angel, three intrepid astrologers, the fearful reactions of a
jealous puppet ruler, the horrors of a minor genocide, and the flight of three
refugees to Egypt. It’s all very topical for our world today, but not the most popular telling. It’s not very twingly… not very ‘jingle-bells’!

**Mark** – a secretary to Peter the fisherman – writes nothing at all because he’s in such a rush to get the details of Jesus’ adult life to the Christians in Rome. **Luke** – a Greek doctor, and not an eye-witness at all, tries to be a good 1st century historian – and tells of Mary, the Archangel Gabriel, and Shepherds. In contrast to these three, **John** takes a philosophical tack – no nativity scene – just the words we heard read a few moments ago – and a bit of a double mouthful – because the word he uses is the word ‘Word’. In the original Greek of the NT the word for ‘Word’ is ‘logos’. It has the same root and virtually the same sense as our word ‘logic’. ‘In the beginning there was the logic and the logic was with God, and the logic was God.’ I wonder if you’ve ever thought about how the idea of God fits with the idea of logic… or whether, putting the ideas together, as John does, there could such a thing as a divine logic?

And what’s all this got to do with Christmas anyway? The key line in John’s philosophical account is this one: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” So the divine logic becomes a vulnerable human baby. Now there’s a radical idea to wonder about over turkey and figgy pudding! A second century Bishop helps us take the next step with this idea. He said: “God’s Word became human to accustom human beings to receiving God.” I wonder how much time and effort we give to receiving God. The opportunity starts here, tonight, in the latter part of our service, as we take and bless and break and give bread – and share wine to remember and receive Jesus. It’s an open invitation.

If all that’s a bit too philosophical for you – or in some way not very accessible on this occasion – John’s account offers the same good news in the simple metaphor of light… but still with the same challenge that the world continues to struggle with, the challenge of receiving truth. John says, “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 true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” I think that’s just as topical for our world today… post-modern, post-truth, post-Brexit, post-Trump… most of us have some sort of experience of spiritual or existential darkness. Most of us will have had to live with some sort of disappointment this year, and we have all been witnesses to the darkness of Aleppo and Mosul, and the plight of refugees. It’s in the news daily. In John’s account of Christmas, and in the Christian world view, darkness does not have the last word.
The more philosophical identification of Jesus as the Word, or as the light shining in the darkness, is the message of Christmas according to St John. Setting this alongside the more twinkly account of the nativity in St Luke, and alongside the harsh account of the arrival of the Messiah in St Matthew, the Bible offers us a wide range of options with which to try and take hold of the meaning of this season. The real challenge is in the receiving. It’s entirely possible to take hold of something, to examine it, and to give it back or even refuse it. It’s the same with any gift (Christmas jumper, chocolates, or whatever your latest fad is) and it’s the same with the gifts of bread and wine in our Communion.

St John addresses this too: “To all who received him, who believed in name, he gave power to become children of God.” God’s gift of god’s-self is a gift that is received through faith. The same gospel accounts tell us that faith which is only the size of a mustard seed is enough to move mountains. If you don’t feel you have even a mustard-seed of faith, then simply say “Lord, increase my faith!” and mean it… and dare to ponder these things, and dare to come again, bringing any questions you might have.

Seeking truth in a darkened world, a world that seems rapidly to be losing its appetite and its faculty for truth is not an easy job. And the journey of faith is not without its difficulties. It’s forbiddingly lonely to do it alone. But that’s why we seek to be a community here at Great St Mary’s. The church is here so that people can travel together; sharing doubt, seeking truth, journeying in faith; and that puts us in the same company as Mary, and Joseph and the Shepherds, and the Wise Men, who witnessed the Word made flesh, the true light, in the infant Jesus, that first holy night. Amen.