

Followers of the Way

The Word became Flesh

Steve Campbell, 30-11-25

John 1:1-14

We all know the Christmas story. It's been told countless times in schools and churches up and down the country, in the annual nativity plays, but this story that is so familiar to us is only found in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew.

Luke tells us the story from Mary's perspective: and from it, we have the births of John the Baptist and Jesus foretold; the Annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary; Mary's subsequent visit to Elizabeth; the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and the appearing of the angels to the shepherds telling them of the babe laid in a manger.

Matthew tells us the story from Joseph's perspective: and from it, we hear of the angel appearing to Joseph in a dream, telling him to take Mary as his wife; the visit of the Wise Men from the East bearing gifts; and the flight to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous intention.

Yet the traditional Christmas Gospel reading is not from Matthew or Luke, but from John.

Why?

Because, whereas the other two Gospels tell the story of Christmas, John tells us the meaning behind it. In the traditional service of Nine Lessons and Carols this reading is introduced with the words: 'St John unfolds the great mystery of the incarnation.'

These magnificent words do just that:

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' (v.1)

We use words to express ourselves, to convey our thoughts and feelings through breath and vowels and sounds. But God's Word is much more than that: it is a part of Him; it is a Person; a member of the Godhead. 'And the Word *was* God.' John's Prologue deliberately echoes the opening of Genesis: 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.' (Genesis 1:1)

So how did God create the universe? By the work of his hands? By moulding and making?

Well, that possibly was the process He used, but listen to what the Bible tells us: 'And God *said*, "Let there be light." And there was light.' (Genesis 1:3) God spoke the Word, He breathed out by the breath of His Holy Spirit, and the universe came into being. So here we see the three persons of the Holy Trinity at work in creation, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

John picks up this theme in his Prologue. Speaking of the Word he said, 'Through him all things were made; without him, nothing was made that has been made' (v.3). So that means, all things were created by God through His Word. The heavens and earth were created first, but all was darkness. Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and the life-giving light shone forth.

John says of the Word, 'In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood (or overcome) it.' (vv.4-5)

This theme of light and darkness is developed throughout the rest of the Gospel. And as well as reflecting the creation of light at the beginning to dispel the darkness, John also is echoing the words of Isaiah 9:2:

'The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.'

As a child I was afraid of the dark. Every night, when I went to bed, my Mum had to leave the landing light on and my bedroom door slightly open, so that I could see the faint glow shining into my room. One night she forgot, and turned the light off before she went to bed – I awoke during the night, screaming and crying because it was dark. Mum rushed in to comfort me, then kept the landing light on. That sliver of yellow light offered me hope whenever I woke up.

Light brings hope, and there is no greater hope than Jesus, the incarnate Son of God. In John 8:12, during the Feast of Tabernacles, when four huge lamps were lit at night time illuminating the whole of Jerusalem, Jesus declared,

'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'

The world in Jesus' day was as dark as at the beginning, before the light was formed. The world in our own day is just as dark. We are *still* a people who walk in darkness. We need His light to show up our dark sinfulness. We need to be called out of darkness into His glorious light. In other words, we need His life-giving light. We sing in the modern hymn,

'Light of the world you stepped down into darkness, opened my eyes let me see.'

Without Jesus, we are dead in our transgressions and sins. With Him, we have life eternal.

John the Baptist came as the forerunner to Christ, to prepare the way and tell others of the light, pointing them in His direction, that they might believe. All the Gospels mention John and give him a prominent place at the beginning of their accounts, and show clearly he was not there to promote himself, but to point to Jesus. As the Baptist would later humbly proclaim in John 3:30, 'He must increase, but I must decrease.'

Then come some of the saddest verses in the Bible.

'He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.'
(vv.10&11)

The creator of the world came into the world he created: was seen, heard, touched; but many did not recognize him. He came to His own people, the Jews, those who had been long awaiting the Messiah, those who should have welcomed him with open arms. Instead, we are told his own did not receive Him. They didn't want him. They turned him away. They rejected their own Messiah!

WW1 chaplain and poet, Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy (Woodbine Willie), wrote a poem summing up the non-recognition of Jesus in his own day.

Indifference

When Jesus came to Golgotha,
they hanged him on a tree.
They drove great nails through hands and feet
and made a Calvary.
They crowned him with a crown of thorns,
red were his wounds and deep,
for those were crude and cruel days,
and human flesh was cheap.
When Jesus came to Birmingham,
they simply passed him by.
They never hurt a hair of him,
they only let him die.
For men had grown more tender
and they would not give him pain,
they only just passed down the street,
and left him in the rain.
Still, Jesus cried, 'Forgive them,
for they know not what they do.'
And still it rained the wintry rain
that drenched him through and through.
The crowds went home and left the streets
without a soul to see,
and Jesus crouched against a wall
and cried for Calvary.

What a very sad and sorry situation, now as then. But then we come to one of the most hope-filled verses of Scripture – 'Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.' (v.12)

Just because others reject him doesn't mean we all must do so. Christ offers Himself to all; and to all who receive Him, who believe in His name (that is, put their trust in Him through saving faith), He offers not only the opportunity of salvation, but He gives them the divine right to become children of God. We live in a society that demands rights of various kinds: human rights; civil rights; women's rights etc. But here is a right that doesn't need demanding, because it is freely offered – not just to a particular group, or a select few, but to everyone. You, me, anyone who believes in his name, can be called a child of God.

How marvellous! How wonderful! Here's an offer you cannot refuse. And yet so many have, and so many still do. We have received this wonderful offer. We have received this divine right, so may it never be said of us that we did not recognize him, that we did not receive him.

Then we come to the climax of John's Prologue, v.14: 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.'

Or as the Message Bible memorably puts it,

'The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son. Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.'

Here then is John's account of Christmas. Here is the great mystery of the incarnation. Whereas Matthew wrote, 'Emmanuel, God with us', and Luke declared, 'Unto you, is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour who is Christ the Lord', John proclaimed, 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'

The glory of God has come down to earth, and John could say, 'We have seen his glory.' The glory of One full of grace and truth. We too can see His glory when we look on Jesus with eyes of faith. We too can be full of grace and truth as we follow Him, and spread that message abroad.

May this be the experience of each one of us this Advent and Christmas season and for evermore. Amen.