

CHRISTMAS (PART) 2

Christmas 2 Year A

Jer. 32:7-14; Ps. 147:12-20; Eph. 1:3-14; Jn. 1:(1-9), 10-18

Gladstone 05/01/2020

As strange as this might appear, this morning, a full twelve days after the event, we go back to the Christmas story, for some further reflection. In a sense, this Sunday, which marks the end of the Christmas season (i.e. the 12 days of Christmas), we have the opportunity to round up the events of the last two weeks and take a look at it from a slightly different perspective—the perspective of the apostle John. Now, I've preached from these passages from John on a number of occasions, usually on Christmas Day. Today, however, I want to take a look at it as, in a sense, a theological summary of the story of the nativity of Jesus Christ—and what that means for us, now.

It's probably fair to say that John's approach to the Christmas story would be difficult to do in a children's program—and I've never actually seen anyone attempt it. There is no baby lying in a manger. There are no parents traveling to Bethlehem. There are no angels or shepherds. There is no star or magi. In fact, John doesn't give us much of a historical account of Christmas, at all. Instead, what he gives us, is a confession of faith about the incarnation of God. You see, John isn't so concerned about exactly what happened in Bethlehem during the reign of Caesar Augustus (or King Herod). He's much more concerned about helping us understand who Jesus is, for us. As one commentator suggests, "the story of Jesus is not ultimately a story about Jesus; it is, in fact, the story of God."

The first 18 verses from John chapter 1, that we are looking at this morning, is often referred to as the *Prologue* of John's gospel—and it gives us, more or less, a confession of faith, not just of the apostle John, but of the early church at the time of his writing (which may have been up to 80 years after Jesus' birth). The joyous witness contained in these verses, is spoken by those whose own experience has been decisively marked by the incarnation of Jesus—of Jesus becoming human. This passage is no so much a theological speculation about the character of the incarnate Word (Jesus), but the testimony of those whose lives have been changed by the incarnation.

Through these verses, we are asked to understand Jesus' coming into the world through the perspective and confession of John's prologue. And as I've already mentioned, this text contains none of the conventional elements of the Christmas story. Instead of a manger, angels, and magi, John 1:1-18 presents the church with its explicit theological vision of the difference the incarnation makes in the life of the world. It's not just about a theological explanation of the incarnation of Jesus—it's about what that means to and for the world.

John 1:1-18, is concerned with two different spheres of God's presence: First, It's concerned with the eternal—the heavenly—the sphere of the cosmic Word of God that existed before the world—but secondly, it's also concerned with the temporal—the

sphere of John the Baptist, the sphere of the world, and the incarnate Word—the Word made flesh, dwelling among us. The interaction between these two spheres is what’s at the heart of this passage. It’s John’s introduction and setting of the scene of what is to come in the rest of his account of the Gospel. The rest of John’s gospel makes a lot more sense when you first understand where John is coming from—from the context of these first 18 verses.

These two spheres can be illustrated by the paradoxes that we find in v. 1 and v. 14.

The Word **was** God—yet, the Word **became** flesh.

The Word was **with God**—yet, the Word lived **among us**.

The Christmas confession of John and, one can assume, the Christian community at the time of John’s writing (We get that by noting the “us” and “we” in v. 14), extends beyond a baby being born and wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger. It’s the belief that he existed before creation and that he comes and lives among us now.

Jesus, as the Logos or Word of God (for that’s what the word Logos means), is the One who reveals God to the world. He is God’s revelation of Himself to us. He communicates to us the thoughts, feelings, and desires of God. Yet, he doesn’t just talk about what goes on inside God—he is not just telling us things about God—he is God. His life reveals God. In order to know God, all you need to do is to look to Jesus, to listen to him, to try and understand him.

Consequently, when we talk about the Scriptures as the word of God, we need to understand that the scriptures are only the word of God insofar as they reveal God to us in Jesus Christ, the true Logos or Word of God. We also need to remember that that when we hear the scriptures being read, we need to realise that, through them, and through Jesus, God is speaking to us.

Jesus’ mission is then picked up in the last verse of our text, verse 18: *“No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”* The Greek word, that’s used here, *exegeomai*, literally means, “to interpret”. It’s the word that becomes exegesis, in English when we talk about expounding Scripture. In other words. It is Jesus, then, who “interprets” the Father for us. Jesus, in his life and witness, is the clear revelation of the Father.

And so, it is into the *kosmos*—the world that has turned away from God—that the Word of God comes to dwell. And even though the world was created through the Word, it doesn't know him. John writes, *“He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”* (Jn. 1:10-11)

It's like children not knowing (or appreciating) their parents. They were created by them, but that's no guarantee that they know or appreciate them—they may, in fact, hate them.

Yet, it is into this world that God so loves (3:16)—this world that doesn't recognise him—that the light, which is the Son, is sent to save (1:9; 3:17, 19). Later on we're told that the world will also hate Jesus' followers (15:18, 19; 16:33; 17:14), but we, perhaps similar to Jesus, are nevertheless, sent to live in the world (17:11, 18)—to bear witness to the incarnation of God in Christ and to share in Christ's ministry of salvation in the world—to declare what God has done, is doing, and promises to do—a declaration that will evoke either assent or denial of the Word from those who hear.

No doubt, you have heard some Christians described as being, “so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good.” For John, however, the realm of Jesus' ministry and the ministry of his followers *is* in the world—that mass of humanity who doesn't know God and who will hate Jesus and his followers. So it is that Christmas is more than a day in December, in which we celebrate the single event of Jesus' birth; it becomes the basis of our “work,” which takes place in the world.

What does it mean, then, for our life “in the flesh” that God, himself, became human flesh? Usually, in the scriptures, particularly with the apostle, Paul, “the flesh” is seen in rather negative connotations. It stands for all our passions and evil desires. But not so with John. For John, “the will of the flesh”, we find in verse 13, simply indicates that that becoming children of God is not something that comes from human powers or desires, but from the Spirit of God.

The difference, is that John's emphasis in this context, is between seeking life through human activity or through hearing Jesus words, which “are spirit and life.”

On one hand, the incarnation took place at a particular time in history. On the other hand, this is a confession of faith of the people in John's time—and, of course, us. John writes, *“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.” (v 14)*

It wasn't just “them” back in history with whom Jesus lived, but “us”. It wasn't just “them” who beheld his glory and received grace from his fullness, but “us”. As such, this also becomes *our* confession. Christmas can't be just the historical event of a birth in Bethlehem, but a present confession of faith about God's presence and glory and grace for us.

John reminds us that Christmas is more than all the pageantry of the nativity scene (or Christmas trees and candlelight services and so on). Christmas is a concrete demonstration of God's love for all humanity—a concrete expression of God's love for us.

It's been suggested that in these opening verses of John, he is quoting from an early hymn—something that preachers may do in sermons or in newsletters from time to time.

Songs are important teachers of the faith. Before children are able to read and understand the Bible, we teach them songs of the faith in Sunday school. Simple songs are easy to remember. I'm sure that many of you adults still remember some of your Sunday school songs. They leave a lasting impression on you. Songs have a powerful effect.

John chapter 1 contains similar themes to other early Christological hymns in scriptures found in both Philippians and Colossians (Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20), which stress the pre-existence of Christ. Jesus existed before the creation of the world and in some mysterious and unexplainable way, Jesus was also involved in the creation of the world.

This divine power that was part of creating the universe comes to us as a human being. The hymn in John says it very simply, *"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."* The hymn in Philippians elaborates this point: *"He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, he was revealed in human shape."*

Very little is said in John, or in the other early hymns about Jesus, concerning the nativity scene. At least in these hymns, the early Christians didn't sing about angels and shepherds or a star and Magi or even a baby in the manger. While I certainly don't want to take any of these away from the Christmas story—or make less of them—there is much more to this season than just the sweet baby Jesus in the manger.

The theme that stands out from these early hymns, is that the almighty, all-powerful God, who created everything that exists, is far beyond our understanding and comprehension. This same God came to earth. God came to us, as a human being in human flesh. This is God's love in action. As the Gospel of John says in chapter 3: *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."* More than all the pageantry of the nativity scene, Christmas is a concrete demonstration of God's love for all of humanity—a concrete expression of his love for you and me.

Christmas does mean a baby in a manger, but in the face of that infant, there is the outpouring of God's love for you and me, and for all humanity.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.