

The Word Became Flesh

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Sermon prepared for **25 December 2005**, fifth sermonⁱ.

Readings: John 1: 1-14

(15 minutes)

Theme: "*The Word Became Flesh*"

Show slide show (The Word Became Flesh).

Jesus is God

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

These are not the kind of words we expect to read on Christmas Day, are they? We would expect to read about Jesus being born in a manger, or about the wise men or the shepherds. It is the nativity scene that we expect to see on Christmas, not the "Word of God".

It is fascinating to compare the opening chapters of the four gospelsⁱⁱ. In Mark's Gospel, which modern scholars believe was written first, we are introduced to John the Baptist. Mark opens like this:

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way—a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' " And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Mark then proceeds to tell us about Jesus' baptism, his temptation in the desert and then the calling of the first disciples. Mark gives the impression that Jesus came to earth as a fully grown human being.

In Luke's Gospel, which probably came second, we are first introduced to Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah to tell him that Elizabeth is pregnant with John the Baptist. Then later Gabriel appears to Mary to tell her that she will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Then later, Jesus is born in a manger, and the shepherds come to pay homage. Later we meet John the Baptist and learn about Jesus' baptism. So Luke attempts to correct the impression Mark creates, by emphasising that Jesus was born as a baby, and that he was born through the union of Mary and the Holy Spirit. But in so doing, Luke conveys the impression that Jesus came into being only at birth, that he had no heritage.

Thirdly, we come to Matthew's Gospel. Matthew opens his version of the Gospel with a long "genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham." Matthew then proceeds to explain that Mary became pregnant through the Holy Spirit, Jesus was born, and the wise men come to visit. Only then do we meet John the Baptist. So Matthew corrects the impression Luke created, by tracing Jesus' lineage back to David. This was especially meaningful for the Jewish people, who were expecting a Messiah of the line of David. But Matthew perhaps overemphasises the human nature of Jesus, by pointing to his human ancestry, through his human father Joseph.

And then the last Gospel to be written – probably one of the last books of the Bible to be written. What John emphasises is that Jesus has always existed – long before his baptism, before his conception and before David. He was God's companion from the very beginning of time, he was instrumental in the creation of the universe. John declares that the human Jesus that lived in Palestine was in fact God in a human body.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. ... 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.

John helps us to understand that the man Jesus, who lived in Palestine two thousand years ago, always was God and always will be God. Through the Old Testament, from the very first words, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth", Jesus was there – and he was there as the same person we come to know in the Gospels. He was always loving, compassionate, emotional, articulate, creative, humble, and powerful – He was always full of grace and truth. Although we don't really get to meet him until the New Testament, Jesus was always there, with the Father, working out God's will on earth.

And so, when Jesus was born around 6 BC, he had already been God for a very long time. And it is this birth that we celebrate at Christmas – the birth of God Almighty in human form. This is what the shepherds and the wise men recognised – they recognised that this little baby, looking so cute and cuddly, was in fact GOD, very GOD, completely GOD!

Light & Life

Jesus is presented in John's Gospel, as holding out light and life to us. John paints fabulous pictures of Jesus as the light of the world and as holding eternal life in his hands. John tells us that

- [In Jesus] was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.

Jesus says of himself,

- I am the way and the truth and the life (14.6)
- I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (8.12)
- whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life (4.14)

And so Jesus holds himself up to us as the light of the world, as the one who possesses the authority to give us life. In a way, he is himself life that star that the wise men saw in the east – they followed the star to get to Jesus. What we need to do is to follow Jesus – to follow the light that he holds up to us to get to the glory of God the Father.

Believe & Accept

Jesus says that we can have Life – that's life with a capital L – if only we believe in him and accept or receive him. John, writing some 70 years after Jesus' death, tells us that most people did not recognise Jesus for who he was. John says,

[Jesus] 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. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

And here is the great promise that Jesus brings, that when we receive him, when we believe in him, he makes us children of God. Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus comes back to this promise again and again:

- For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (3:16)

- I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. (12:46)
- For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life. (6:40)

So, what we have here is Jesus Christ, God in human form, who brings light and life into our lives, and who promises that when we believe in him, when we receive him for who he is, then we will enjoy a relationship with God forever.

It is God's great desire and intent that we **all** should be in relationship with Him. This is why he created us in the first place. And this is why Jesus, the Word of God, came to earth – to open a way for us to be reconciled with God.

ⁱⁱⁱIn our reading from John's Gospel today, John explains very simply what is required to be in relationship with God. We must believe in his son Jesus and we must receive him. That's it – simple as that.

Our belief in Jesus is a recognition of who he is – that he was not just a prophet, or a teacher or a great man. But that he was, indeed, God in human form. And that he lived to reveal God to us. That he died to open a way for us to the Father. And that he stands at the entrance to our lives, with his arms open, waiting for us to invite him in.

And our receiving of Jesus means that we open the door to our lives, and accept him into our lives as our Lord and King. We acknowledge that by virtue of who he is, that he has a say over us, and we surrender ourselves to his loving guidance and direction.

Invitation

Let me, then, invite you, on this Christmas Day in 2005, to take a step of faith, to open your heart to Jesus, to acknowledge who he is and believe in him, and to receive him into your life as your Lord and Saviour. I can assure you, that God honours such a step of faith, and that he will continue to walk alongside you from this moment until eternity.

If you sense God calling to you, reaching out to you, I'd like you pray along with me now – a simple prayer in which you state your belief in Jesus and receive him into your life. And if you do pray this prayer, or if you'd like to but have some reservations, can I encourage you to come up to the communion rail after the service this morning, and to talk with one of our counsellors.

Let's pray, then. If you want to accept Jesus into your life today, then pray along quietly with me. "Lord Jesus, I want you to come in and take over my life right now. I acknowledge that you are indeed the Son of God, who lived on earth to show me the Father, and who died to open for me a way to the Father. Jesus, I know that I cannot get to God through my own efforts, but only through you. And so I accept you as my own personal Saviour. I believe you died for me. I receive you as Lord and Master of my life. Help me to turn from my sin and to follow you. I accept the free gift of eternal life.

"Give them assurance of eternal life and of their being right with you. Walk with them as they grow in their relationship with you."

ⁱ This was a very difficult sermon for me emotionally and spiritually. I went through such a range of emotions during the few weeks before preaching. I felt depressed; avoided looking at or working on the sermon, even when I had time to; was anxious. I don't think it was about the content – this was worked out quite well in advance – probably three or more weeks before delivery. I believe it was a spiritual attack on me, for preaching the Gospel so explicitly, in a church where I have never heard the Gospel presented like this. Much prayer

on the day before led to a sense of peace about the sermon, and I felt like I had it under my belt.

ⁱⁱ This first section is based on my use of redaction criticism – looking at the differences across the gospels in order to elicit something of the intentions of the authors. In addition, I have used the conclusions of source criticism regarding the sequence of Gospel authorship in order to suggest an evolution in the presentation of Christ in the early church. Unlike redaction critics, however, I don't believe that the new material was created by the authors to make a point – rather I think two things contributed to the evolution: firstly, I think their understanding of who Christ was/is and what he said/did evolved over time and that the later books (John) provide us with the fruits of retrospection; and secondly (and this is what I emphasise here) each Gospel generated potential misunderstandings which needed correcting in the subsequent version.

ⁱⁱⁱ At the early service I was going along fine with the sermon to this point, with a congregation of mostly visitors. As I finished the previous paragraph, I went completely blank. I was preaching without notes – just my Bible with the lists of verses printed and the gospels marked with postits. And I had absolutely no idea what to say next. It was like my mind just emptied out. Fortunately, I had brought my notes with me, in the back of the Bible. I spent some moments getting the notes out, finding the page – I knew exactly where in the script I was – and as I saw the first words of this paragraph, I knew exactly where to go. I was fine after that, and fine at the second service. Perhaps this also was a spiritual attack – at the point of preaching the gospel message. It also highlighted that I needed to work at better systems of memorising sermons to preach without notes.