



Sermon

Christmas – The Incarnation

John 1:1-14

25/12/16

© 2016 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

I read that in the last few years archaeologists working at Nazareth uncovered a house from the time of Jesus – the first find of a structure from that period in Nazareth. Yardenna Alexandre, who was the excavations director at the Israel Antiquities Authority said that it appears that Nazareth was “probably was a hamlet of about 50 poor Jewish families.” “Archaeologists are not claiming it is the house where Jesus lived,” she said, “but a young Jesus may have played around the house with cousins and friends - it's a logical suggestion.”¹

Archaeologists use excavation and carbon-dating to look back in time. Astronomers looking at distant galaxies see light which has travelled for many thousands of years so they see what was there thousands of years ago. In effect they are looking back in time.

A written document communicates to us from a former time when the writer wrote down his ideas.

As we think about today's Gospel reading, we are making observations about what was thought and reported in that former time – we can think of it as a sort of 'time telescope' to look back.

Let us turn the focussing knob to v1 of our passage. Although written around the end of the 1st century, it refers back far further, indeed to before the Big Bang, when there was neither matter nor time!

John introduces his gospel with a glimpse of the Son of God in eternity before creation.

He uses the term 'the Word' to refer to the Son of God – picking up the Jewish understanding that the Word of the Lord was the divine agent in creation: Ps 33:

“By the word of the LORD the heavens were made.”

They also commonly described revelations from God as 'the Word of God came to the prophet saying...' - understating the Word to be personal.

In Greek philosophy the term *logos* (ie word) was used to mean the rational mind that ruled the universe.

¹ http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2009-12-21-jesus-house-nazareth_N.htm

John keys into both cultures to declare that Jesus is the Word, the creative agent of God, the expression of whatever God wants to communicate to us and the very thought of God. It is a breathtaking and beautiful claim.

So what does he say of this 'Word'?

In the beginning was the Word: "In the beginning" is an obvious reference to Genesis 1 before creation. He means 'eternity before time was.' This Word has always been.

The Word was with God: There is some distinction between the Word and God. This could be rendered, "The Word was face to face with God" which implies relationship.

The Word was God: So in spite of any distinction, the Word was God.

The Word is then affirmed to be the creator of everything created, that is of everything apart from God, so the Word is the source of life to all of us.

The Word is the light giving revelation of God to us, giving truth and the means of seeing what there is and where to go.

This is John's attempt to put into words something of the nature of this person he is trying to describe. And it is a picture of an awesome person.

Now let's turn the time telescope focus forward to v14 which relates to 6BC. Now stunningly, this Word became flesh, that is was took on a body, became human. Yes, Jesus was born. In this verse, John tells of Christmas.

How could it be? How could this eternal God be born in a baby in Nazareth? It is a mystery. Martin Luther said, "The mystery of the humanity of Christ, that He sunk Himself into our flesh, is beyond all human understanding."

Perhaps a story would illustrate the immensity of Jesus' decision. A youth kept tropical fish. In fact he specialised in Siamese fighting fish. And naturally, they fought! This made him sad because he was very fond of his fish and it hurt him to see them tearing fins off each other. He would try to stop them with his hands, but that only frightened them away. One day he asked his father if there was any way he could stop them fighting. His father said, "It's their nature to fight." "But, Dad, they would be so much happier if they didn't fight! They are frightened of me but what if I became a fish and so I could show them and tell them?"

His father (who had surprising powers) agreed that would be the only way to reach them. "But you must realise they may well tear you apart. I can turn you into a fish and I can restore you to life again if they kill you, but I can't change you back to a man again."

Now it's just a picture, don't push it too far. But it is a glimpse of the decision Jesus made – because you see he is still a man. He took on humanity permanently not being any less God but always to be human. The risen Christ has a real physical body and that body bears scars!

It is very wonderful, impossible to understand how, but we can marvel at the reality and the love.

Now let's turn our time-telescope to v10 a setting of about 30 years later.

The Word, the expression of God came to his own things. Why are they his own? Because he created them. Humanity in general neither recognised the creator when he was here nor accepted him. His own people did not receive him. No they rejected him!

Remember the account of his visit back to his home town of Nazareth: Although he had been welcomed in parts of Galilee by the poor people, in Nazareth they scoffed as Matthew records,

“Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?” And they took offence at him.

Remember the rejection of him by the nation, as John tells it:

They shouted “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.” The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.”

Can you imagine the pain of having his own creatures reject him? Worse than the boy in the fish story, because these are not just pets but creatures he himself had created to love and to be loved by. Even the Jewish people he had chosen from all the world to have a special training in knowing and expecting him, even they rejected him. Even the people of his own village, even his own family didn’t understand. Take Mark 3:

Then Jesus went home. Again such a large crowd gathered that Jesus and his disciples had no time to eat. When his family heard about it, they set out to take charge of him, because people were saying, “He’s gone mad!”

(Mothers always get uncomfortable if you miss regular meals.)

But there is a more positive note here. V12

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

Not children by natural reproduction but born spiritually of God. This spiritual birth describes the coming alive of our spirits to relate to God. It happens when you believe Jesus is the Son of God, who died for your sins and you ask him to forgive you and be your Lord.

The astonishing thing is that Jesus did not come to teach us about living better. He came to deal with what stops us living properly (sin) and to give us a new nature.

He came to be one of us, so that he could make us one with him.

When we accept him, he does give us a new nature. He puts his spirit within us and lives in and through us.

But we do have to receive his gift. Christmas presents have to be received and opened to be enjoyed. Benefits may be granted but if not claimed they are useless to us.

To pardon everyone’s sin, Christ shed His blood on the cross. The price was paid. But each individual must receive this forgiveness for it to be effective.

So finally, let’s turn the focus of our time telescope back to the setting ‘TODAY.’

John has introduced this person to us who is God, who came and was born as a human, who did that so he might make us like himself. We’ve seen that there are two responses: rejection or receiving.

What’s your response? Have you received him and believed in his name and become a child of God?

If you have, are you going on with more ‘Yes’ decisions? Are you following him? Are you obeying him? Are you allowing his life more space and reign within you?

In the end there are only two responses. We have heard them in the reading: Some did not receive him; some did receive him.

Whether for the first time or as a restatement will you receive Jesus Christ as Lord, as God, as Saviour tonight/today?

Receive or reject?

I want to lead you in a prayer which is for anybody here who says I'm not sure I have that relationship through Jesus; I'm not sure that I have that hope – but I want it.

Let us pray. Jesus is here. He was born, died, rose again and is alive and here with us.

Lord Jesus Christ thank you that you love me so much, that you are full of grace. I now turn from everything I know is wrong. (If anything comes to mind ask God to forgive you.) I put my trust in you tonight/today – the word made flesh and I receive you now in my heart. Come into my heart Lord Jesus by your Spirit. Be with me for ever. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer for real or if you want to think more about it, I have some booklets available after the service. Do take one if it would help you.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.