

The Word became Flesh - Christmas 2022

Date: Christmas Day, 2022

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Micah 5:2-4; John 1:1-18

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

One of my favourite things each Christmas here at St George's is singing carols around Battery Point on Christmas Eve. But I do admit that some of the words in the carols are pretty strange. Sometimes they have words that were common centuries ago when the carol was written, but now we never use, except in the carol. *O come all ye faithful* is a particularly bad offender. Before we get to the glorious "sing choirs of angels" in verse 6, we have to wade our way through "lo, he abhors not" in verse 2, "we too will thither" in verse 3, "bring our hearts oblations" in verse 4, and "fain we embrace thee" in verse 5. For folks like our Chinese friends coming to Australia, Christmas is a linguistic nightmare! What on earth do these words mean? Just briefly, "lo" means "look!"; "abhor" means to think is disgusting; "thither" means "to that place"; "oblation" means "gift"; and "fain" means "gladly".

Christmas may seem quaint and old fashioned to some, like those obscure words. It certainly is old. We celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth over 2000 years ago. But with Christmas we touch a thrill of hope that we need just as much today as the shepherds did on that first Christmas. The Bible gives 3 accounts of Jesus' birth. Matthew recounts the event from the perspective of Joseph, Jesus' adoptive earthly father. Luke, from Mary's perspective. This morning I'd like to explore John's account. This is the cosmic and eternal perspective, in just one short sentence:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Let's meditate on these familiar and yet strange words together.

The Word. Who is it whose birth we celebrate at Christmas? John names him as the Word. What does John mean? We use words to communicate. We say that actions speak louder than words, and sometimes that is true. But it is with words that we reveal what is going on inside our heads and hearts. With words we reveal who we are. And so John can say in verse 18 that this one, the Word, who reveals to us the Father, God himself. We need not be in the dark about who God is, because Jesus has made him known. Later in John's Gospel Jesus says, "If you really know me you will know my Father as well."¹

¹ John 14:7

How is it that this Word can reveal the eternal God who is the source of all that exists? Because he himself is with God and is himself God. He is the one through whom the Father has made all things, and in whom all things exist. This is what we read in verses 1-4

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
2 He was with God in the beginning. **3** Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. **4** In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

We come to the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the one God in three persons, three persons in one God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Mystery because God is beyond us, but in the Son whose birth we celebrate today, revealed to us. The question for you and me is will we receive the Word this Christmas? Will you let him reveal God to you? Not your thoughts on God. Not what Krishna, or Buddha or Mohammed say about God. But this one, the Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing, as we sing.

Became flesh. In Latin this is *in carne*, where we get the word *Incarnation* from. That God exists is not the extraordinary thing about Christmas. Most people around the world and through the ages have believed in God in one form or another. True atheism is a minor historical oddity. No, the extraordinary thing about Christmas is that God was born as a human being, as one of us. This is what that other great carol, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* captures:

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
 Hail the Incarnate Deity
 Pleas'd as man with man to dwell
 Jesus our Immanuel

The eternal God is veiled, hidden, clothed in human flesh. He is pleased to dwell with us as one of us. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us.

This is extraordinary humility of God. That he the Lord should become a servant. That he the Creator would become a creature. The infinite take on finitude. The early theologians of the church never ceased to marvel in this paradox. That the one who contains all things, who cannot be contained, was contained in Mary's womb. That the one who holds all things in his hands was cradled by his mother. He stoops to our humanity and raises us to his divinity.

What dignity and worth is bestowed upon each and every person, that God would share in our humanity. Each and every moment of life is made holy by his incarnation - conception, birth, childhood, adolescence, learning, work, rest, laughter, suffering, joy, sorrow, even dying and death itself. No part of our humanity is beyond his reach.

Dwelling among us. Not coming to visit. Not popping over for a cuppa and then leaving you alone. Dwelling among us. Coming to live, permanently. The particular word for dwelling literally means pitched his tent. This reminds us of the ancient story of God's people in the Old Testament. When God rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt he instructed Moses to build a tent to be erected in the middle of their camp. This was the tent where God's presence would come to live among his people. In time that tent was replaced by a temple. Now, it is in Jesus himself that God has come to live in the midst of his people. His own body is the temple where God makes his dwelling.

Jesus of course is not physically with us now. He has ascended to the Father's right hand where he lives still in the flesh of his humanity. But he has poured out his Spirit to live in us and among us. Now the Church, the body of Christ, is the temple in which God dwells. And he dwells in each of the Church's members, all those who trust in Christ. That the Word became flesh and dwelt among us reminds us that he still dwells among us by his Spirit. So if you want to see where God is at work in the world, look at the church. It may not be fashionable, it's certainly not flashy, it's often out of step with the rest of society, but it's here that you will find God. Will you receive his invitation, for you to come and live where he dwells, among his people?

Us. All of this can seem remote, removed from our everyday experience. It was after all 2000 years ago! But here the final word gives us the most wonderful promise. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among **us**, even you and me. How could he come to someone like me with all the mess of my life? Maybe you think yourself poor, unworthy. What were the shepherds, but poor and humble? And yet the angel came first to them. Maybe you think you're not educated enough to understand these mysteries. The shepherds were not the scholars of their day, but simple folk, and yet they were the first to grasp the wonderful news. Maybe you think that Christianity is a Western religion, and you don't want to give up your cultural heritage. Look at the wise men. They came from the East to worship him. They offered him the best of their culture. There is room for you and your culture at his feet. What's more, the wise men were the intellectuals of their day. There is room for those who ask big questions, who seek the truth. But you have to bow before the manger and offer him your gifts. Maybe you think Christianity elevates men and denigrates women. Who was it who bore the highest honour to bear the Saviour? Mary his mother. Joseph is there too, in quiet strength, giving space for his fiance, listening to God. Maybe you think you're too old for this, that it's only for children or that your time has passed. Consider ancient Simeon and Anna, who find hope and joy cradling this baby in their arms. Christ has come for each of us.

Each of us can find our story caught up in his. He has come to make his dwelling among us, even us. The question is, will you receive him?

John writes that, “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.”² He has come to us and for us, but it is possible to reject him. Yet to receive him is to become a child of God. Receive Jesus, and God will adopt you into his family, so that you may share in the very relationship of the eternal Son with the Father. This is his promise. This is his Christmas gift to you and me. *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.* He has come to dwell among us. He offers to dwell in you by the Holy Spirit. This Christmas, will you receive him? Will you believe in his name? He will come to you and make you a child of God.

² John 1.11-12