

John 1:14

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Date: 25 December 2011

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[0 : 00] give or take a few years, a baby boy was born in Bethlehem. His mother was called Mary and his father Joseph, though of course there were those who questioned the paternity of the child.

Despite the less than conventional circumstances of the conception, his birth was a happy one. Mary and Joseph, aware though they were of the murmurings of some, were the proud and, I imagine, relieved parents of their firstborn child, given the odyssey that they had had to endure to arrive at his birthplace. Mother and babe were in good health, and that, as they say, was the main thing.

Now, the safe arrival of a wee baby is something to be celebrated, but it is not, by any stretch of the imagination, an extraordinary event. It happens all the time. No doubt in the time that it has taken us to get to this point in the service, many, many babies have been born. Maybe here in Aberdeen, certainly if we extend our reach around the world. But the birth in Bethlehem would seem to have been extraordinary in character. It was, if you wish, everything points in this direction, a seriously big deal. If for no other reason, though there are many other reasons, the simple fact that you are here this morning listening to me speak about the birth does suggest that it must have been special. The accounts that we have in the Gospels record the circumstances of the birth and the accompanying events or phenomena, and they also paint a picture of something quite extraordinary going on.

We're told that the cosmos, in a sense, acknowledged the birth by means of a star that stopped over the place where the child was. We're also told, and we've read, of a host of angels who celebrated the birth with a first-century heavenly flash mob over the night sky in Bethlehem. It's also recorded that some shepherds and wise men from the east visited the new arrival and worshipped the child. And this is, by any measure, though very familiar, when we just try and step back and consider what is being said.

[2 : 58] It is, as I say, by any measure, certainly unusual behavior and points to a birth that is extraordinary or a seriously big deal. Well, why was it a big deal? Why do Christians claim that the birth of Jesus was a big deal? The answer to that question will be found in the measure that we appreciate what the Bible teaches concerning the birth of Jesus is the birth of Jesus as a human being. The birth of Jesus is the central event, we might call it that, of what in Christian theology is known as the incarnation.

Now, the word incarnation is an anglicized Latin word or expression, but the root Latin word is recognizable to us. The Latin word *carno*, which means meat or flesh. And from that word we derive a number of English words, including one that I suppose has a Christmas flavor, *carnivorous*. I imagine most of us are carnivorous or will be carnivorous today or later on today. So incarnation means enfleshment, or it means or can be translated or otherwise described as becoming flesh. Incarnation is to become flesh. Now that sounds quite gory.

Again, maybe our familiarity with the language means that it doesn't quite hit us as being as gory as it is, really, becoming flesh. And in a few moments, a little bit later on in the sermon, we will make a passing reference to the apparent or the actual crudity of the word. But this word incarnation, becoming flesh, was it the product of the imagination of some early church father wanting to find some very clever word to describe the events at Bethlehem or the coming of Jesus? Well, no, the word is taken directly from the pages of Scripture, specifically from the verse that we want to consider this morning.

The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. If you'll turn with me to John's gospel and chapter one, the prologue to John's gospel, we're going to read there from verse one through to verse 14.

And our particular focus will be on the beginning of verse 14, though we'll also give some thought to the very first verse.

[5 : 54] But we'll read the whole of this prologue, or certainly verses one to 14, at the beginning of John's gospel. 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.

There came a man who was sent from God. His name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light. He came only as a witness to the light.

The true light, that gives light to every man, was coming into the world. He was in the world. 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.

[7 : 07] Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us.

And you will have noticed in the reading.

Or certainly, as we would continue to see what it goes on to say, through to the end of verse 18, that John identifies the one who is described, the Word, who became flesh.

He identifies him as the babe who was born in Bethlehem. We notice there in verse 14, we've read verse 14, that he is described as the one who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The Word, full of grace and truth. And then, just a moment later, in verse 17, we read, For the law was given through Moses.

[8 : 24] Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. So very explicitly, John identifies the Word as being Jesus, who was born at Bethlehem.

Now we might say, well, we know that, that's so obvious. But of course, we know it, and it's so obvious, because we're so familiar with the passage. But it is worth just noting that the author himself, John, explicitly identifies the Word who became flesh as Jesus.

Now we want to think about this claim that is made by John. The Word became flesh. It is, certainly as we would begin to understand what is being said, it is arguably the most preposterous claim that has ever been made.

But what beggars believe in greater measure, even than the claim itself, is the fact that anybody would believe it. That anybody would believe that this actually happened.

that the Word became flesh. But Christians do believe that what John affirms here in the first chapter of his Gospel is descriptive of a real event, of something that really did happen.

[9 : 43] The Word really did become flesh. But what does that actually mean? What is being said here in these words? The Word became flesh.

Well, there are three parts to this statement that require explanation. First of all, the Word. Then the verb, became. And then finally, the word flesh.

And we'll have to leave to one side what he goes on to say. There is so much here, but we do have to limit ourselves to these words. The Word became flesh.

As I say, we want to think about these three parts of this preposterous affirmation. First of all, the Word. What does John mean by speaking of the Word?

Who or what is the Word? Who or what became flesh? Now, in verse 14, he doesn't tell us. And he doesn't tell us for a very simple reason, in that he has already identified the Word at the very beginning in verse 1.

[10 : 51] And in verse 1, John describes the Word. Not only in verse 1, but through in the following verses. But we are going to go to verse 1 to consider this first part of the statement, the Word became flesh.

To identify the Word. And we're going to do so with the help of what John says there in the first verse. Then we'll go back to verse 14 and consider became and flesh.

So we're thinking about the first part of the statement, the Word became flesh. But to help us identify the Word, we're going to go to verse 1. And what does it say in verse 1? Well, it says, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

So in verse 1, though John has more to say, but in verse 1 he says three things that help us to identify who or what he is speaking, we'll discover it is who, in using this terminology of the Word. The first thing he says is that in the beginning was the Word. Now the language of in the beginning takes us back very quickly to Genesis.

[12:05] We identify the language. It has that feel of Genesis to it, and it does because they're exactly the same words with which the first chapter of Genesis begins.

But it's not only the words in the beginning that transport us, as it were, to Genesis, but the reference to the Word is also an echo, perhaps much more than an echo, but certainly an echo of Genesis 1.

And it's repeated assertion throughout the chapter, And God said, and it was. And God said, and it was. Language that portrays to us or communicates to us this creative Word of God.

Indeed, we've sung in Psalm 33, By the Word of the Lord were the heavens made. And of course, John himself in this prologue, in verse 3, goes on very explicitly to speak of the Word in its creative power, or in its creative role, if you wish.

Then in verse 3, Through Him, that is through the Word, all things were made. Without Him nothing was made that has been made.

[13:21] But as we want to identify the Word in verse 1, We need to cut to the quick as we think about this first part, In the beginning was the Word.

What does John say in relation, or concerning the Word, in relation to the beginning? Well, he says simply that the Word was.

The Word was. The Word was already there. The Word predates a creation. The Word that was present in the beginning has no beginning of its own.

The Word simply was. The Word always was. In the beginning was the Word. John claims for the Word an eternal existence.

The Word eternally and continually was. This is the big truth, if you wish, of this first part of John's description of the Word in verse 1.

[14:30] The Word is eternal. But John goes on in verse 1, and he says a further thing concerning the Word. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.

The Word was with God. And the key word here is with. The Word was with God. It reveals a second big truth concerning the Word.

It actually reveals two related truths. The Word, though eternal, as already established, is distinct from God.

He is with God, and so distinct from God. The Word is not some fancy synonym for God. Rather, the Word enjoys a distinct identity.

The Word was with God. But the Word with also presents to us the truth that the Word is in relationship with God.

[15:30] Not simply with God in the sense of alongside God, but with God in the sense of being in relationship with God. A relationship, of course, that implies and requires personality.

So the Word, John is telling us, is a distinct person capable of and actually enjoying an eternal relationship with God.

So in the beginning was the Word. The Word is eternal. The Word was with God. He is distinct from God, but enjoys a relationship with God.

Then the third thing that John says there in verse 1 is that the Word was God. Now, if you are listening to this sermon on the basis that, well, this is religious talk, and so it doesn't need to make sense, then this wouldn't be a problem.

You know, if you have that conception of religion as being something mystical, and it's nice, and it's good to listen to, and we don't actually need to understand it, then this isn't a problem. But if it is your perspective, as I hope it is, that things should make sense, at least in the measure that we can understand them, then this does create a very serious problem.

[16:49] And you would be justified at this point in asking if John has lost the place. He has just stated that the Word was with God. And we have, from this, I think reasonably, concluded that the Word enjoys a distinct personality or personal identity from and relationship with God.

But now John drops what we might call this bombshell, and he says the Word was God. This is the pinnacle of this threefold description that we have in verse 1 of the Word.

And in it he states, very boldly, the Word was God. The Word was eternally God. Nothing higher, nothing greater could be said of the Word.

All that may be said of God may properly and rightly be said of the Word. He shares the divine nature.

He owns all the divine attributes. He exercises the divine prerogatives. The Word is God. He is God.

[18:06] I wonder if you can get your head around what John is saying. I hope that your answer is, well, no, or at the very least, that you have difficulty getting your head around that.

And if that is your experience, well, all I would say is join the club. But I wonder, is our inability to get our head around what John is affirming in some systematic way to say, well, yes, I can understand that.

That makes sense. That fits into categories that I can relate to. If you have difficulty in doing that, is that difficulty, is that inability, a good reason to question the veracity of what is being affirmed?

I would say by no means. Maybe if I can illustrate this in a probably very inadequate way, but perhaps, I hope, a helpful way. Just in the last few days, I was watching a program where the guy who was presenting was the gregarious Professor Brian Fox.

I don't know if that name rings any bells to you. The guy who was presenting the world of the universe, the particle physicist who is seeking to, I suppose, present this whole world of quantum physics in a popular fashion for the masses, for the likes of you and me.

[19:34] Well, Professor Cox, armed with an engaging, if somewhat patronizing, smile, took us by the hand through the world of particle physics in this program that I was watching.

The program, I think, was called An Evening with the Stars, which is a bit of a play in words because he was talking about the universe, but his audience were all minor celebrities or perhaps medium or major celebrities, I don't know.

They were all there gathered in the auditorium of the Royal Academy or some other august venue. And Professor Cox, as I say, gave us this idiot guide to quantum physics, and he took us by the hand through the world of Pauli's Exclusion Principle and Planck's Constant and, of course, the evasive Higgs boson particle and other treats of that nature.

Now, despite the professor's best efforts, and he did make a very big effort, I have to say, I was struggling to keep up with everything that he was saying. I just couldn't get my head around the whole matter of, well, matter and the universe and everything that he was trying to explain to me. You have to put this in context. I got a B in old grade physics, and I was delighted with that. You know how teachers can appeal marks? Well, I think my physics teacher was going to appeal that, but not to get me an A, but to get me a C.

[21:00] He was so astonished that I even got a B. So just that gives a little bit of context to this program that I was watching. I was struggling. I was struggling to understand the concepts and just the whole world that he was presenting to me.

Now, my point is this. Do I conclude that because I struggled to understand fully what was being said, that the ebullient Professor Cox was talking rubbish?

Well, not at all. Now, he may have been talking rubbish. I don't preclude that possibility. But my inability to get my head around his discourse is not sufficient reason to come to that conclusion. Now, as I say, this is probably a very poor illustration, but can we not say concerning these words of John that are difficult to understand, to get our heads around?

Is the fact that they are so difficult? Is the fact that we struggle to, as it were, bring them together and relate them one to another in a reasonable format, I suppose?

[22:16] Is that reason for us to question their veracity? I think it would rather be worrying if we could altogether get our head around what is, what we believe to be, an inspired description of the Word.

So then we take at face value what John says concerning the Word. The Word is eternal. The Word is distinct from and yet in relationship with God.

And the Word is God. But we have to move on. The second part of the statement that we're considering in verse 14, and we return now to verse 14, is the verb became.

The Word became flesh. John uses here the verb to be, the same verb that he used to describe the Word in verse 1.

But the important and revealing contrast is in the tense that John uses. In verse 1, it was in the imperfect tense and is translated in English as was.

[23 : 25] In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God. Indeed, the tense that is used points to a continuous state.

So we might say, or we might legitimately translate it or understand it, if not translate it, as the Word always was. There's this sense of eternal continuity in the manner in which John uses the verb to be there in verse 1.

The Word always was. He always was with God. He always was God. He never became God. He always continually was.

But when we turn to verse 14, things change. It's the same verb, but the tense changes. There we read, the Word became flesh. This tense has different names, but there's one that I enjoy, and it's never, or seldom, helpful to start going into the world of grammar and tenses.

But on this occasion, I'll give you one name that is given to the verb used here, because it's such a lovely word. It's the tense, the punctiliar tense. And punctiliar just means something that happens at a point in time.

[24 : 43] Somebody who's punctual is somebody who comes at the point in time that they're meant to be there. And this is the punctiliar or punctiliar tense.

And so what John is saying is that what he is talking about happened at a particular point in time. The Word became flesh.

He became flesh. The Word became something that he was not previously. Now, we've already suggested that what's been said is preposterous.

Well, this is quite outrageous, given what John has already said about the Word, that the Word is God. And yet, of the Word, who is God, John attributes becoming.

The Word experienced at a particular point in history becoming or change. We could ask the question, well, when did this happen?

[25 : 42] At what point in history? Well, it would be nice to say on Christmas Day, but that wouldn't be strictly true. Rather, nine months before in Nazareth, hidden in Mary's womb, the Word became flesh.

Now, as we make this outrageous statement or really just quote John, it's John who we attribute responsibility for it, we do have to accompany it by flagging one or two complementary truths.

The first thing that it's worth to just flag, without going into any detail, is that it is the Word that becomes flesh. Now, in the light of this passage and other biblical material, we know that the Word is the Son of God, the second person of the Godhead.

And it is the Son of God who becomes flesh, not the Godhead or the divine nature. To put it maybe in ways that is easier for us to get our heads around, we can say this, God the Father did not become flesh, but God the Son did.

The Word, the second person of the Godhead, of the Trinity, the Son of God became flesh. That's one thing just to flag. The second thing to flag is also very important, and it is this, that in becoming flesh, flesh, in the Word of God experiencing becoming, that in itself wholly remarkable, but in that becoming, the Word did not cease to be what He eternally was.

[27 : 17] He did not cease to be God. In the incarnation, to use the language of one of our own professors, we have addition, but not subtraction. In the person of Jesus, the fullness of deity dwells.

So the Word became. But what did He become? And this brings us to the final thing that we want to notice in John's statement here, describing for us or portraying for us something of what the incarnation involved.

The Word became flesh. What does flesh mean? Well, John is stating, as we noted at the beginning, in very vivid and very crude language, that the Word became a human being.

The Word became a man, a man of flesh and bones, a real man. The Word did not simply take on the appearance of a man, and it may well be that in using this word flesh, John is deliberately defending the truth against what was a nascent heresy, the docetic heresy that suggested that Jesus looked like a man.

He appeared like a man, but He wasn't really a man. And so John uses this very crude language.

The Word became flesh. As if to shout in the face of doubters, He really did become a man, a real man.

[28 : 50] What is involved in becoming a man or of being fully human? Well, the Shorter Catechism can help us, though. The Shorter Catechism really just borrows the language of the definition of Chalcedon, which takes us back to the fifth century, more or less.

And it provides a helpful summary of the biblical data, when it states that the Son of Man, or rather, sorry, the Son of God became man by taking to Himself a true body and a reasonable soul.

This is what is involved in becoming flesh, in becoming a man, taking to Himself a true body and a reasonable soul. Now, the reality of a true body is very vividly expressed for us in our text.

The Word became flesh. A body like our own, subject to pain and exhaustion, to grazed knees, and all the gamut of what a human body can experience.

To death itself was a true body. And there is a danger in shying away from this truth and in imagining that Jesus wasn't really just like us.

[30 : 04] I just mentioned in the passing last night when we were singing the carols. One of the carols away in a manger assures us that the little Lord Jesus, no crying He made.

And we say, well, that's not true, because He was a real baby. And so, yes, He did cry when He was hungry and when He got hurt and when He was cold, and all the reasons that babies cry.

Because the Word became flesh. One of us, just like us, a true body. But He also took to Himself a reasonable soul.

Now, this speaks of a variety of aspects of our humanity. It speaks of a human mind and, indeed, the limitations inherent to a human mind.

We can't develop what the implications of that are, but He took to Himself a human mind. He took to Himself also the full range of human emotions. He took to Himself also the complex experience of human affections and relationships.

[31 : 06] He made His dwelling among us as one of us. The one born in Bethlehem, whose birth we celebrate today, is the eternal Son of God, who has become flesh, a real flesh and blood, card-carrying human being.

The Word became flesh. And so, as we return to where we began, we ask the question, Why did the star shine brightly over Bethlehem?

Why did the heavenly hosts sing glory to God in the highest? Why did the shepherds and wise men prostrate themselves in awestruck wonder?

Why do we worship Jesus today? And why is it the most reasonable thing for us to do, to worship Jesus? Well, John provides the answer.

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray.
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