

Christmas Service

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[0 : 00] Now let's turn to the first passage of Scripture that we read in John's Gospel, John chapter 1. I'd like to look there especially at words in verse 14.

Gospel of John, chapter 1 and verse 14. The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. Especially just the first words of the verse, the Word became flesh.

Now in these few short words we have in fact the classic statement of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, the enfleshment of the Son of God.

Or as it's sometimes put, Son of God becoming man. Although it's probably more accurate to talk about the Word becoming flesh in biblical terms.

Now we know that John's Gospel is in all probability the last of the Gospels that was written. And that may be one of perhaps several reasons why it differs in emphasis from the others.

[1 : 13] And stands out quite clearly as being different. Obviously also there's a different style of John as a writer. But one thing that we can see is that in the Gospel of John there seems to be a more developed statement of what we may call the theology of the incarnation of Jesus, the Son of God, coming into this world as a man.

And it would seem that this fits in with the fact that John's Gospel appears to be the last of those written. And this is evidence of the developing or the growing interest in the study of what actually happened when Jesus came into this world as the Son of God among men.

And of course that study has developed from the New Testament time onwards in what we call theology. Now the difference is that the theology that has followed the New Testament time cannot claim to have the inspiration that John's Gospel so obviously had.

In other words, John's Gospel is not just some great theologian meditating on the meaning of Christ's work. But it is in fact the Apostle John writing under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit writing down the meaning and interpretation of the events that he had seen, that he had witnessed.

Now this great claim of John's Gospel that in Jesus the Word became flesh is something that must be understood against the background in which it was said.

[3 : 10] And when we do that, we begin to understand what a stupendous statement it is. After all, against the Jewish background of this time, such a statement, particularly in the terms in which John obviously means it, would in fact be written off as blasphemous or as nonsense because there was a deeply ingrained belief in the Jewish people of the absolute separation between God and man.

And that it was really impossible for God in any sense to become man. It was also impossible for there to be any kind of differentiation within God himself because of the ingrained belief, the right belief, that God is one.

But they ignored the evidence from the Old Testament of the diversity within God himself. There are also passages in the Old Testament where the Word of God appears to be treated as God himself. There are also passages where the wisdom of God appears to be a person and appears to be God yet differentiated from God.

But nonetheless, the Jewish thinking of the first century was implacably opposed to any such idea. So we can understand the great uproar that such ideas caused, not only when they first came from the lips of Jesus himself, but then also from the apostles later on.

[5 : 04] But the question that we have to deal with first and foremost is, how did those ideas originate? How could people like John, who were born and brought up within Judaism, how could they have come to such an unpopular belief and one that really contradicted so many of the basic ideas of the religion in which they were brought up?

And the only answer is that in expressing these ideas, they were giving expression to the experience that they had with Jesus Christ.

In other words, here in this gospel, among other things, we have the apostle John reflecting on his experience of those three years living with the Lord Jesus, following him up and down throughout the land.

He tells us some of the things that the Lord Jesus did and said, but also, particularly here at the beginning of the gospel, he is giving what is called a prologue or a kind of introduction, a statement about the conclusions that he has come to concerning the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we can be assured that these conclusions are inspired by the Holy Spirit and consistent with all else that is said in Scripture concerning the Lord Jesus.

[6 : 42] What was their experience of the Lord Jesus that caused them to come to such conclusions? Well, John himself, in the first part of his first letter that we read, he refers to the fact that he had seen the word of life.

He had heard him. He had even touched him. He had handled him. In other words, he's talking about the real down-to-earth experience of seeing Jesus, listening to him, and even touching him. And it's on the basis of that experience that he knows that Jesus is, in fact, the Son of God. The Word has become flesh.

The experiences were no doubt many and varied. But imagine that you lived for three years in intimate contact with the Lord Jesus, seeing him perhaps every day or almost every day for throughout that period of three years.

seeing how he worked and operated and spoke. And throughout it all, you never saw him sin. You never became aware of him doing anything wrong or questionable.

[8 : 02] Now, that experience must have been a profound experience upon the disciples. And they reflect upon it later on in some of their letters, referring to the fact that he was without sin, or that he never sinned.

And this obviously had a profound effect upon those men that never left them. Here was one totally unique, totally different from any other one they had ever seen.

Then imagine also that you had witnessed the Lord Jesus stilling the storm, saying, Peace, be still to the waves in the Sea of Galilee.

Or you saw him healing the sick. Or supremely, you saw him forgiving a man his sin. Now, as we've noticed already at another occasion, it's all very well for someone to forgive a person who has sinned against him.

But what kind of person is it who goes about forgiving the sins, all the sins that a person has committed against perhaps countless other people? A clear and stupendous statement of Jesus' claim to be divine.

[9 : 18] Only God can forgive sin in that sense. Imagine seeing the Lord Jesus doing that and hearing him saying those kind of words and knowing that you could not write it off because you thought he was insane or because you thought he was very evil, because the very knowledge of the person that you're dealing with contradicts any such idea.

These are the kind of experiences out of which these men came to an awareness of who the person of Jesus Christ really is.

What about in his teaching about himself particularly? For instance, when he said, teaching publicly, that if anyone is thirsty, they should come to him and drink.

And hearing that some of the people who had been sent to actually arrest him went back to their masters and said, we couldn't arrest this man.

No man ever spoke like he does. No man has ever spoken this way. In other words, this growing awareness, even amongst others who weren't intimately connected with him, that there was something totally unique about the way in which he spoke, particularly about the way in which he spoke about himself, that didn't fit any kind of obvious explanation, because normally people who would draw attention to themselves in that kind of way we would write off either as being madmen or being extremely evil people with some kind of ulterior motives in getting people to follow them.

[11 : 06] So these kind of conclusions are not open to us. As C.S. Lewis said, he did not leave those options open to us.

He never meant to, to simply say that, well, Jesus is a good man or just a good teacher. We cannot conclude that.

Either he is someone extremely insane or extremely evil, or else he is what he claims to be, the one who does forgive sins, the Son of God, and so on.

We cannot simply write him off as a good man. These are the experiences that the disciples had of the Lord Jesus, and these are the building blocks, we may say, out of which they constructed this belief that Jesus is none other than the Son of God.

There are clearer claims than even these we have looked at already when he was asked specifically by the high priest recorded in Mark's Gospel, are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed, the Son of God?

[12:18] Jesus said categorically, I am. And right away, of course, his enemies recognized this as blasphemy, as a claim to be co-equal with God.

These experiences, but particularly their experience concerning his death and his resurrection, had an indelible effect on the minds of these men.

And what they wrote and what they taught afterwards was the only explanation of the events that they had seen and witnessed that they could possibly give.

In other words, they proclaimed the Lord Jesus as the Son of God, the God-appointed man, the man sent into this world, the man who was more than a man, who had come for the salvation of sinners.

Let's look then, more particularly, at John's special formulation of this truth when he says here, the Word became flesh.

[13:30] This is John's theological formulation, if you like, of the experiences that he has had in seeing and hearing and touching the Lord Jesus.

Let's break it down simply into the three main words that are used here. First of all, the Word. What on earth does John mean by this rather mysterious expression, the Word?

Well, it's obvious in the context that it is a name for the Lord Jesus. As he moves on throughout this prologue, we come to where he talks about John the Baptist speaking about this one.

And of course, we know that John the Baptist spoke concerning the Lord Jesus. And right towards the end of this prologue, in verse 17, the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

So quite clearly, he is talking here, using this title, the Word, for Jesus. This Jesus whom he knew, whom he lived with for that period of time, with whom he had those various experiences we've been looking at.

[14:45] Now, the expression that he uses here as a title for Jesus Christ, it's a very interesting one because it was a word that was in circulation at this time as being a much more important name or description than what we might just think by the expression, the word.

It was, in fact, an expression that was used in philosophical and theological circles in those days, an expression that was used with various shades of meaning.

But particularly, we could look at the way it was used by certain Greek philosophers called the Stoics. They used it in the sense of the Word being the divine reason that inheres in the whole of creation.

They believed that the creation is rational, it makes sense, and man is part of that creation, and he is part of that logos, as the Word is, within himself.

They believed in this rationality or this logos. And, of course, it's very much linked with the idea that man has speech because, of course, the Word is what you speak.

[16:11] This, then, was something of the Greek idea. Now, that kind of idea was permeating society at that time. But also, of course, John was speaking not just to Greeks, but also speaking to Jews and with those who had a Jewish background of thought, the Old Testament.

background of thought. And there, of course, we discover that this same expression is used, the Word of God. And used not only in the sense of simply being the written Word of God, as we have at the Old Testament, but used in the sense of God's agent by which God creates the world.

In various passages talking about the creation, we're told that it was created by the Word of God. And we have the passage that mentioned already in Proverbs where wisdom is given that same kind of role.

So it's clear that even in the Old Testament background and the Jewish background of that time, there was this idea concerning the Word of God.

Certainly not as developed as John has it here, but there is that kind of background. But perhaps particularly, there was a Jewish philosopher of the name of Philo who lived in Alexandria in Egypt. [17:36] And in his writings, he makes great use of this expression, the Word, the Word of God. He was actually living at the same time as the Lord Jesus, living during the first century AD in Egypt.

And he uses this expression, the Logos, not of the Lord Jesus Christ at all, but using it both of God's plan, God's purpose in creating the world and in sustaining it in this sort of Greek sense because he took a lot of Greek thought as well as Old Testament thought.

He also uses it, interestingly enough, of the person in the Old Testament who is referred to as the angel of the Lord. So quite clearly, this expression, the Logos, or the Word, was being used in various circles in those days.

And it would seem John deliberately chooses this expression. He selects it as the clearest title he can give for what the Lord Jesus Christ is and what he came to do, to be the Logos of God.

Now, he gives us some understanding of what he's meaning by it in the first few verses of the chapter. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

[19:07] Now, there we see right away that he establishes the fact of the divinity of this Word, the expression the Word was God, can have no other interpretation but that he is saying this Word, this person I'm talking about is divine.

He is co-equal with God. Yet, he clearly makes the distinction that he, that there is a distinction between this Word and what he calls God because he says the Word was with God.

Literally, it could be interpreted he is face to face with God. The idea is he is towards God. They are facing each other, that kind of idea.

In other words, although in close harmony and existence with God, yet there is what we may call a diversity between the two, a unity and diversity as it's sometimes put in philosophical terms.

So, here we have John immediately introducing this idea that here is one who is God yet who also can be distinguished from God.

[20:26] And this is the one that has come into the world. Although he has been with God obviously from all eternity because he was there in the beginning.

And the expression in the beginning means the beginning of the created world, the beginning of the universe. He was there already with God and he has been there from all eternity.

This is the one who has come into the world. Now obviously he's introduced next as being God's executive agent. Verse 3, 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. All of these expressions and they're summing up a great deal of truth concerning the person of Jesus Christ.

But all these expressions stressing that he is the executive agent of God. When God does things, when God does things with regard to this universe, he does them through the word.

[21:32] Through him all things were made. Without him nothing was made that has been made. Now there when we think particularly of the creation, we think about the creative word of God.

In the beginning we're told, the beginning of Genesis, God spoke and it was so. And we have this idea of God's communication bringing things into existence.

John is saying here that communication is not just a mere channel as we might think of it, but that communication is an actual agent of God.

He is the logos of God who actually does that creating. And he is the one also who brings life. He is the one who creates life within this universe, not just created things, but created living things.

And also he is the light of men. He is the one who brings self-consciousness to man. He is the one who creates man as being distinct from any other kind of creature in the world.

[22:40] And so on. We see quite clearly then that this one is God himself, is what we might say as being co-equal with God himself, yet he is an agent of God who performs the purposes and plans of God in this world.

And so later on the expression is used in this prologue that he is the only begotten of God. The only begotten of God.

In this verse 14 that we have selected these words from, we see that later he says we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only son, the only begotten son who came from the father.

So there we have the same relationship introduced at the beginning in terms of the word and God, now placed in terms of only begotten son and father.

So that we can begin to see that there are obviously different ways of trying to describe this great truth that there is one God, yet there is what we have come to call more than one person within God.

[24 : 02] And here, particularly in this passage, we have drawn out for us the distinction between father and son, or between God the father and God the logos.

And so John here is explaining to us, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, explaining to us the relationship of this word, this son of God to the father.

father. Now then he goes on to say that this one, the word, who has existed from all eternity in the bosom of the father, or at the father's side, as he says in verse 18, this one became flesh.

The word became flesh and lived for a while among us. So I want to look next at the expression flesh and what that entails concerning the Lord Jesus Christ.

This expression is used repeatedly of Jesus in the New Testament and it's emphasized that it is extremely important that Jesus came in the flesh.

[25 : 17] For example, we have that expression used in Romans chapter 8 in the passage we read and in verse 3 where it says that God sent his son in the likeness of sinful flesh.

That's the literal expression in the likeness of sinful flesh. It's emphasized there in that passage that he is flesh.

It's not saying that he's in the likeness of flesh, but it's stressing that he was sent as flesh, but also it's stressed that he was not sinful because it is in the likeness of sinful flesh.

In other words, that he came as one who appeared in many ways to be what we might call an ordinary man. He had a human nature that was subject to things like tiredness, hunger, thirst, and so on.

But yet, it was only, we might say, in the sense like our ordinary sinful flesh because there was no sin in him.

[26 : 30] Now, this expression flesh is used in the Bible in several different senses. The strict literal meaning of it is simply as we would use the word flesh, in other words, the sort of the main parts of our bodies, flesh in the sense of the muscle of the body, that kind of idea, in the sense of the flesh of animals or the flesh of man.

But it came to be used as something rather different from that. It came to be used particularly of man himself and man specifically in his frailty or in his mortality.

In other words, that he is flesh. He is subject to the limitations and restrictions of human nature as it now is. A human nature that is under the curse of God.

A human nature that is going to die. That whole idea. And that is what is uppermost in this expression that the word became flesh.

It doesn't mean that the Lord Jesus became flesh in the sense that he became sinful. evil. But it means that he took to himself a human nature like ours apart from sin.

[27 : 54] Not a human nature that was like Adam's before Adam sinned. Not a human nature that will be like ours after our glorification in heaven.

humanity that is in all senses made perfect. But a humanity that was subject to the limitations that were imposed upon our humanity through the fall.

In other words he could suffer pain. He could suffer anguish. He could suffer not only physical distress but also mental and psychological anguish.

life. These then are the things that are stressed by him becoming flesh or the expression that he came in the likeness of sinful flesh.

That's going rather further than just saying he took flesh. He came in the likeness of sinful flesh so that anyone looking at him and seeing him without looking too carefully or closely at what he said and what he did would simply think of him and treat him as another human being.

[29 : 08] When he sat down beside the well in Samaria he was tired and he was thirsty and he asked the woman of Samaria for a drink and her first thoughts about him he was just an ordinary Jew who was making an extraordinary demand of her because she was a Samaritan and he was a Jew and it was only gradually as he spoke to her that she came to an awareness that here was no ordinary man.

So then we see something of what's involved in this expression. But what is no doubt uppermost in the mind of John here as he is writing is to stress the real humanity of Jesus Christ.

It's stressed in scripture that he is not sinful. He does not take flesh, human nature, in the sense of being sinful. But it is stressed that he takes flesh, that he is a real human being, a real man.

Now that was extremely important in the time in which John was writing because there were those who denied that Jesus was a real human being.

There were those from that time on who developed the idea that the person who was called Jesus really only appeared to be a real human being.

[30 : 39] He wasn't a real human being. He remained always the eternal son of God. And what was seen by people was not a real human nature at all.

Now it's perhaps hard for us to grasp that kind of idea today. but nonetheless it's still extremely important that we stress the real humanity of Jesus Christ as we'll see in a minute when we think about the actual meaning of the incarnation and its relevance to us still today.

But John in his letter makes it quite clear that it is the spirit of Antichrist that denies that Jesus came in the flesh. That is the spirit of Antichrist because that destroys at its most fundamental the Christian gospel.

Because if the Son of God has not become flesh, has not become a real human being, he can have no link with us whatsoever, nor can he do anything on behalf of us or in our place, in our stead.

And if he cannot do any of those things, he cannot save us. flesh. So it is extremely important, and the writers of the New Testament make it clear that it is extremely important, that he is in fact flesh.

[32 : 06] He took to himself a real human nature. And here is what we were saying earlier about the virgin birth. This is where this all fits in. And that is why that is so important.

because by his virgin birth, he was given a real human nature inherited from his mother Mary, yet one that was sinless, one that was kept from sin by the intervention of the Holy Spirit in that miraculous conception within the Virgin Mary.

So then, we need to take the expression now as a whole. we read the word became flesh. The word came to be flesh.

Now that doesn't mean that he changed into something that he was not before. It means rather that he took to himself something additional which he was not before.

In other words, he continued to be the same. He continued to be the word, yet he took to himself something extra, and he became flesh.

[33 : 27] Now we use the expression became in that same sense in many different ways. We talk about someone becoming a doctor. We don't mean that they suddenly change totally from being one kind of being into another kind of being, but rather they add something extra on to themselves.

In this particular case, extra knowledge, extra recognition, extra qualifications. Or we talk about someone becoming a father. We don't mean that he suddenly changes from being one kind of being into another kind, but rather he adds something extra, a new relationship, new responsibilities, and so on.

That is a sense in which it is used here, although in a unique sense, because here we're not talking simply about adding qualifications or relationships, but we are talking about adding another nature.

Now these are the expressions that we have come to use in theology, and we can't really find any other kind of explanation or any other kind of terminology to express precisely what the New Testament expresses.

What happens in the incarnation, in the Son of God coming into this world, is that he takes to himself a human nature.

[34 : 54] He does not become a human person. That would destroy the truth that I've just been saying, that the eternal word of God did not change into some other kind of being.

He remains the eternal word of God, yet he takes to himself, he joins to himself, if you like, a human nature.

A human nature including the physical, the body, and also the mental, the psychological. He takes a whole human nature, but he remains a divine person.

He remains always the Logos. He remains always the Son of God. The difference being from before that happening until after it's happening, is that from that time on, from the time of the incarnation, he always remains now one person with two natures, the divine nature and the human nature.

man. And if we may say that is a change, well, certainly it is a change, but it is not a change to his basic divinity.

[36 : 08] He remains the same eternal Son of God, yet he has taken something extra which he will keep. The scriptures would lead us to think which he will keep forever.

He remains not only the Son of God, but from now on he remains also the Son of Man. And indeed, it is as the eternal Son of Man, the eternal Son of God and the Son of Man, that he is now ruling over this universe.

Well, the question we must answer finally is why is this truth so important? Or to put it another way, why was it necessary for the Son of God to become flesh?

Why is this so central? Why is it stressed so much by the writers of the New Testament? Well, it's important first for the reason given in verse 18.

No one has ever seen God, but God, the only begotten, or God, the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

[37 : 20] Now, that is an amazing expression, and the best reading here really is God, the only begotten. Distinguishing God, the only begotten, from God the Father.

And he is the only one who has made God known. And that is the first reason, and perhaps the uppermost reason, in this passage in John's Gospel, for the necessity of the incarnation. incarnation. If it were not for the incarnation, we could not know God. Only God can reveal God truly.

Only God coming into the world in this way, coming as one, yes, who has taken a human nature, but still as the eternal logos of God, only in that way can we know God and truly know him.

Now this can only come about if there is what we may call a certain relationship between God and man.

[38 : 29] And God has revealed in his word that he created man with a particular relationship to himself, and that is he was created in his own image. Now in that sense we can say that God could become man in a sense in which God could be not have become any other of his creatures, because God did not make any other of his creatures in his own image.

God could become man because there was a God-likeness about man. There was what we may call the personal side of man, or what Francis Schaeffer called the mannishness of man, that distinguishes him from anything else in creation, and that is that he is made like God.

And so God, the eternal, only begotten, could become man. And in doing so, he could reveal what God is really like, as John puts it here, full of grace and truth.

Now we could not have known what God is like in those senses unless God had sent his son into this world in that way.

We could never really have understood what God is truly like until we saw Jesus. We could not understand, particularly what John calls here the grace of God.

[40 : 01] We could not understand that God was willing, indeed God had purpose, to forgive sin, to send his own son to save those who are lost.

We could understand, we could have understood nothing of that about God unless the Lord Jesus had come revealing that. But also, the incarnation is necessary because only a man can represent us.

Only God can reveal God and only God can perfectly accomplish his purposes. All that almost goes without saying.

But on the other side, only a man could truly represent us in the way that Adam represented us truly as the representative man to represent the whole human race as he stood before God and God commanded him not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

For in the day that he ate of it, he would surely die. He stood there as our representative and he could do so truly because he was a true man. He could represent the whole human race.

[41 : 28] But it requires another man and one who is truly man to again represent the whole human race. And that is why it was absolutely essential that the Son of God did not just work in mighty power as the Son of God to do something to this world, but that he came as a man, a man who could represent us truly before God.

Not only that, it seems that it was absolutely essential that he should come as a man because only a man can die.

And the way of our salvation depends upon the penalty of sin being poured out on one even unto death.

The whole of our salvation depends upon one who is our representative and one who is our substitute, one who can actually stand in our place, bearing upon himself our sin and bearing it to the point of the judgment of God against that sin being fully experienced by that one.

And that is why it is absolutely essential that this one is true man. So that in the justice of God, there is absolute fairness and rightness that our sins committed as those human beings created in the image of God should be truly punished and dealt with in a man.

[43 : 24] but also dealt with in a man who was able to bear it. A man who was able not to be destroyed by bearing that anger and judgment of God.

And it is only because that manhood of the Lord Jesus Christ was united to his Godhead, united to his divine nature, that his manhood was not utterly destroyed by the anger of God, but yet preserved through death itself, so that he came to rise again from the dead.

So then there we have something of the New Testament emphasis concerning the enfleshment of Jesus Christ. Christ. It's not just something that we may wonder at, something that we may admire, something that just tells us how much God feels about us in sending his own dear son into this world, but it was absolutely essential, it was absolutely necessary for our salvation that it take place. Otherwise, surely God would never have done so, God would never have subjected his son to such an experience, to such a humiliation, unless in his good purpose and plan, it was absolutely essential to save man that his son should become a man and should bear the anger of God away upon himself, so that all those he represents, and that means all those who trust in him, all who are his people, so that they will be set free from the penalty of sin, set free from the judgment that confronts every sinner who remains in his sin, set free to be the servants of God and to be his servants forever.

So then, that is the kernel of the good news as contained in this statement of John's gospel concerning the incarnation.

[45 : 42] salvation. The word became flesh and lived for a while among us. The whole purpose of his living amongst us was to reveal God's grace and truth, and to reveal it not just in the sense of revealing it by what he was and by what he said, but revealing it by what he did in dying to take away sin.

So, as it is clearly stated in that passage that we read in Romans chapter 8, that he sent his own son, God sent his own son, in the likeness of sinful flesh, for sin, for dealing, the whole idea of it, is of dealing with sin.

And so he condemned sin in sinful man in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature, but according to the spirit.

Let us pray. Thank you.