

Christmas Day sermon, 2018

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As you may be aware, in the Bible it's Luke's gospel which gives us the stories of the angels and the shepherds, and Jesus in the manger.

Matthew's gospel gives us the slightly later visit of the Magi (the wise men), and the family taking refuge from Herod in Egypt.

John's gospel, written a bit later, gives us a big picture, big-theology look, in somewhat poetic form, in the prologue to John's gospel: taking in the whole sweep of creation being brought to focus in the divine Word taking on human flesh. It's that glorious reflection that we'll hear now.

It won't be on the screen, so you'll have to listen; I'm reading the Contemporary English Version translation. And while it's not normally *our* tradition, I want to ask you to stand for the gospel...

John 1: 1-14

1 In the beginning was the one
who is called the Word.

The Word was with God
and was truly God.

2 From the very beginning
the Word was with God.

3 And with this Word,
God created all things.

Nothing was made
without the Word.

Everything that was created

4 received its life from him,
and his life gave light
to everyone.

5 The light keeps shining
in the dark,
and darkness has never
put it out.

⁶ God sent a man named John,
⁷ who came to tell
about the light
and to lead all people
to have faith.

⁸ John wasn't that light.
He came only to tell
about the light.

⁹ The true light that shines
on everyone
was coming into the world.

¹⁰ The Word was in the world,
but no one knew him,
though God had made the world
with his Word.

¹¹ He came into his own world,
but his own nation
did not welcome him.

¹² Yet some people accepted him
and put their faith in him.
So he gave them the right
to be the children of God.

¹³ They were not God's children
by nature
or because
of any human desires.
God himself was the one
who made them his children.

¹⁴ The Word became
a human being
and lived here with us.
We saw his true glory,
the glory of the only Son
of the Father.
From him all the kindness
and all the truth of God
have come down to us.

RESPONSE:

Teach us wisdom, O God;
let your word bring us light.

In the very beginning of Genesis, God's first word is "let there be light". That light keeps shining in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.

In the late 18th century, Oxygen was discovered by two or three people, independently. One of the stories around its discovery is that it was noted that a sprig of mint put into a sealed jar in which a mouse was otherwise dying revived the mouse; this was one of Joseph Priestley's experiments which told him that something interesting was there.

The Oxygen was in the world, in the atmosphere, for a very long time without being recognised – like the air in which we live and move, it's unseen, and can be taken for granted.

There's a story that when Oxygen was recognised, because of its role in burning some people wanted it to be got rid of. It was in the world, but not everyone wanted it. Perhaps there are some parallels here to what we've heard in our reading? And perhaps it illustrates how it is so easy to take creation itself for granted, and to take life itself for granted, since we're surrounded by it.

Genesis poetically portrays God's sovereignty and creativity as the foundation of all of creation, with humanity having a distinctive role and opportunity in the midst of it, if only we could avoid either thinking of ourselves as gods, or thinking of ourselves as helpless – both of which deny the wonderful - if not entirely predictable – place that God has provided for us.

When we think of ourselves as gods (if we think of what we are doing at all), we risk treating the rest of creation as an inexhaustible plaything and ourselves as immortal; which is plainly foolish but a trap that people seem ready enough to fall into.

When we think of ourselves as helpless, simply at the mercy of the environment and society, we fall short of our God-given skills and creativity to be able to shape society, and to make a difference in how we live in our environment.

There's a familiar story of Paul the apostle, before he became an apostle, being very hostile to these crazy Christian types! And then he had an experience of seeing the light, of encountering Jesus, and then learning to see life and people

around him again in a whole new way. He came to know God as God, whose love for him was found in Jesus; and he came to know himself as not helpless, but engaged fully in the living out what that change of heart, change of sight meant for him. He became a witness to the light, like John the Baptist was before him, keen to share the discovery (like of Oxygen) that actually amongst us is life and love that we too often overlook or ignore, but which is GOOD.

He 'saw the light' not just as a disembodied principle that it would be good to be kind to people and that be God is loving; he saw the actual way that Jesus, in *his* creativity and insight and living didn't just present a message about God, but was himself the message of God - even he, who was born in a stable and who died an ignominious death - but who in between brought life to people, making us new.

The poetic prologue to John's gospel phrases that in terms of people, as they are touched by Jesus and recognise God in him, becoming "God's children".

In one sense that seems over-the-top and unfair – aren't we all God's children, in some sense, anyway? – but the poetry is expressing that actually, when you discover what Jesus brings: that God loves you at the core of your being and in Jesus is the invitation to live that and share that, we ARE actually "re-born", in a sense – this IS the creativity of the God whose word brings light to life.

There is a reason Why this is expressed poetically and creatively! And in terms of our deepest questions like "how should we live?", "what makes for a good life?" and even "why am I here?", actually, Jesus brings God's creative light to bear on all of those questions, as we align ourselves with God's love and are made anew as God's children.

"The Word became a human being
and lived here with us.
We saw his glory,
the glory of the only son of the Father."

Perhaps these could have been the words of the shepherds, too, after they had seen the baby Jesus in the stable. I don't know. Did they just see an everyday kind of baby? Did they just see a hungry small thing that alternated from being asleep to being noisy, with some moments of being fed and periods of curiosity in between? Or did they ponder the message of the angels that actually, God is here, and so recognise the glory of the *source* of life *entering* life?

Did they anticipate the kindness and truth that Jesus would bring; the ways that people would respond; the light that he would bring to all corners of life,

not just to those who were out looking after sheep on the outskirts of Bethlehem? I don't know.

But we anticipate it, here, today; and rightly so. For his life gives light to everyone, and the darkness has never put it out.

To the glory of God! Amen.