

The Word became flesh

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John 1:14

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Suppose I say to you, “I’m thinking of a word. Do you know what it is?” And you reply, “No, I don’t know unless you tell me.” So I say, “Guess,” and you name a few things like “reindeer” or “soup” or “broccoli.” And I say no, no, no. Eventually you give up and I tell you that I was thinking of the word “bacteria.” When you ask why, I say no reason, that’s just what I was thinking of. It would take you a long time to guess bacteria—and maybe you’d never guess it at all. You see, if I’m thinking of a word, I’ve got to tell you or you’re never going to know what it is. Better yet, I need to say it and then I need to show it, and then you’ll understand what I’m trying to communicate.

Something like that is what John means when he says, “The Word became flesh.” Jesus is God’s Word made flesh. The whole truth about Christmas is contained in the first phrase of our text—“The Word became flesh.” Now we know what God was thinking when he tried to communicate his love to us. Jesus is the visible Word of God. He is God in human flesh.

I. Incarnation

Theologians call this truth the Incarnation. It’s a hard concept to understand, and in the early church there were many debates about what it really meant.

- Some people said Jesus wasn’t really a man, he just looked like a man. Maybe he was something like a ghost.
- Others said he had the body of a man but he didn’t have a human soul.
- Still others said Jesus was two people in one body—sort of half-God and half-man.
- And unbelievers said it was all nonsense—that Jesus wasn’t God at all. They claimed he was an ordinary person like you and me with a sin nature just like everyone else on planet earth.

The early church considered the Incarnation to be one of the most important truths of our faith. Because of this, they formulated what has come to be called the Chalcedonian Creed, a statement which sets out what we are to believe and what we are not to believe about the Incarnation. This creed was the fruit of a large council meeting that took place from October 8 to November 1, 451, (3 weeks of church discussion) and “has been taken as the standard, orthodox definition of the biblical teaching on the person of Christ since that day. There are five main truths with which the Chalcedonian creed summarized the biblical teaching on the Incarnation:

1. Jesus has two natures — He is God and man.
2. Each nature is full and complete — He is fully God and fully man.
3. Each nature remains distinct.
4. Christ is only one Person.
5. Things that are true of only one nature are nonetheless true of the Person of Christ.

So The Son did not cease to be God when he became a man. He added manhood but he did not subtract deity. He was fully God and fully man—the God-man.

Ponder that for a moment.

- The Almightyness of God moved in a human arm.
- The love of God now beat in a human heart.
- The wisdom of God now spoke from human lips.
- The mercy of God reached forth from human hands.

God was always a God of love but when Christ came to the earth, love was wrapped in human flesh. Jesus was God with skin on.

The Ant Farm

Perhaps an illustration would help. Let’s suppose that I owned an ant farm, and for reasons known only to myself, I loved those ants more than anything in the world. How could I communicate my love to them? I could shout, “I love you,” but because I speak English and they speak ‘ant’, they wouldn’t understand. I could write them a letter, but they couldn’t read it. I could shrink down to ant size, but they wouldn’t recognize me. But if I had supernatural powers, there is

one thing I could do. I could take on the form of an ant, be born as an ant, live as an ant, and communicate as they do. Then I could find a way to say, “I love you.”

That is what God did. He didn’t mail a letter or shout from heaven, and no he didn’t dictate a bible either. He did the one thing we could understand. God himself came down and entered the human race. He became just like us so that forever we would hear him saying, “I love you.”

We wouldn’t have done it that way. These days we’d schedule a press conference, call the TV stations, hire an agent, meet with the dignitaries, sell tickets, and make a big deal so all the world could see.

But that’s not God’s way. Read the beginning of Matthew or Luke again. Instead of flash and splash, there is a frightened father, a young and exhausted mother, a dirty stable, and a feeding-trough. There he is, ignored by the mighty and powerful—a tiny, helpless baby. Immanuel—God with us.

It’s so simple that you know it must be true. Only God would have done it that way.

Occasionally when you are talking to unchurched people who are asking about Christianity, they say, “I just can’t believe all that stuff.” If you ask them, “What would it take for you to believe?” Some might respond “I would believe if God came down and stood in front of me and told me himself.” Of course that is exactly what he has done. He came down 2,000 years ago and lived among us.

So this passage talk about incarnation – God with us.

It also talks about Habitation

II. Habitation

I love the way Eugene Peterson in ‘The Message’ translates the first part of John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood.”

For 33 years God, in the form of Jesus, moved into our neighbourhood. The NIV says that he “made his dwelling among us.” Some translations say that he “pitched his tent among us.” That’s actually very accurate because the Greek literally means to pitch a tent. It’s the same word used for the Tabernacle in the Old Testament, which was a tent where the glory of God dwelt in the days

before the Temple was built in Jerusalem. The Tabernacle was the divinely-appointed meeting place between God and man. In the same way—but in a much deeper sense—Jesus is the place where we meet God today.

Generally speaking people live in tents because they don't stay in one place very long. Jesus lived in the "tent" of his humanity for 33 years on the earth. He came as a visitor from heaven.

Jesus was God's rescue mission to the human race. He came on a mission from God. When his mission was over, he went back to heaven. While he was here, he pitched his tent among us. When his time was up, he took his tent of human flesh and re-joined his Father in heaven.

This passage is about incarnation and habitation and reflection.

III. Reflection

John next speaks of the reflection/manifestation of God's glory: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father."

In case that's a little unclear, let me give you Eugene Peterson's translation from *The Message*, "We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son."

If someone said to you, you are just like your father! Would you take that as a compliment or an insult? If my kids get told, you're just like you mother, that is a good thing, if they're told you're just like your father, less of a good thing.

For each of us something of our parents rests in us even though it's not a perfect reproduction – whether we like it or not! We all understand the principle of "like Father, like Son." But with Jesus that principle is taken to infinite perfection. Jesus is the exact image of his Father. If you have seen him, you have seen the Father (John 14:9).

When John says, "we have seen," he uses a word that means to gaze intently upon. As Jesus walked on the earth, people could see God's glory shining through him. The shepherds saw it, and so did the angels, so did the teachers of the law who interviewed him when he was 12 years old. The glory was seen in a major way at the Transfiguration. When Jesus turned the water into wine

at Cana of Galilee, John tells us that “he revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him” (John 2:11).

He was not invisible nor was he obscure. When you look at Jesus, you see the face of God.

Incarnation, habitation, reflection and lastly revelation.

IV. Revelation

Finally, this text ends with a powerful word of revelation. It tells us that Jesus came to the earth “full of grace and truth.” Grace and truth are two attributes that don’t often appear together apart from when we talk about Jesus. We humans tend to err on one side or the other. If we stress grace, we are often too quick to forgive without demanding true repentance. If we stress truth, we often sound harsh and unloving. We need both! If we forgive too quickly, we make light of wrongdoing. If we judge too harshly, we make forgiveness impossible.

Grace and truth. These two words explain why Jesus came to the earth. They go to the very heart of the gospel.

- Because he was full of grace, he died for you and me while we were yet sinners.
- Because he was full of truth, he was able to pay for our sins completely. He forgives the sinner because he bore the sin himself.

This is the good news for people like us.

Because he is Grace-full, we can come just as we are. He is easy to approach and we don’t have to clean ourselves up first.

I find it interesting that when we are employing someone for the church, be it a pastor, or office worker, we ask a question.

“Is there anything in your background or present lifestyle which, if it came to light, would embarrass you or your church or your ministry?”

We ask that question to protect ourselves, but God just say’s, come as you are! We expect our city and country leaders to be of good character, and opponents or media, dig around looking for past ‘sins’ that might embarrass them or bring them down. Who among us has lived such a pure life that no

dirt could be found in our past? It is precisely at this point that the gospel message becomes so relevant. No matter how checkered your past may be, no matter what sins you might have committed, Christ invites you to come just as you are—with no preconditions except a sincere desire to be forgiven. When you do, you will be abundantly pardoned.

Because he is truth-full, you can come in complete confidence that he will keep his promises. When he promises a complete pardon for your sins, he means it. Without truth there is no trust.

Do you need a saviour you can trust? Fear not. Jesus is full of truth.

Do you need a forgiving Lord? Come to him for he is full of grace.

So yes Jesus came to live among us, to reflect the father, to reveal grace and truth, but we are also told he came to pay a debt.

Most NZ adults are in some form of financial debt. Blessings to those of you who are not! But the majority of us owe money, either on a car or a home or a student loan, or something of the sort. Although it can be burdensome, for most of us I hope, we can at least see a light at the end of the tunnel. We are energized by the hope that one day it will be paid in full.

To be burdened with a debt from which you will never be set free can be overwhelming. To owe a debt that you know you can never pay off would be crippling in so many ways. Extend that indebtedness, and the penalty it incurs, into eternity and it becomes horrific beyond words.

Such was the reality of our spiritual indebtedness to God . . . until Jesus paid it all! This is the imagery Paul uses in Colossians to describe the reality of having our sins forever forgiven. We are no longer in debt because Jesus paid it all! Whatever we owed, he paid. Whatever penalty we incurred, he endured.

God's Gift to You

This is why Jesus came. This is the real meaning of Christmas. WE touched on this a couple of weeks ago when we had communion, this is where Christmas and Easter are actually the same story. In just a few weeks Christmas will arrive and families will gather to open their gifts. It might seem a bit morbid but don't forget Easter this Christmas.

God has a Christmas gift for you—wrapped not in bright paper and with fancy ribbon—but in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. It is the gift of his Son. It is for you. The gift is still there. It must be personally received. But you can never truly understand the significance of Christmas until you look at it from the Cross of Jesus.