

## Sermon Christmas Day 2023

At the start of our worship this morning we made procession around the church and ended up here, at the manger scene. There in reverence, we offered prayers and worship to the Christ Child. Our procession - our wandering around the church -perhaps reflects something of the wandering of humankind, the journey of man through life. A relentlessness only resolved when we come to Christ. Saint Augustine was right: *Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee*. Christmas reminds us that only in Christ do we find the proper object of our devotion. Only in Christ do we find one worthy of our love. Only in Christ can our wandering and aimlessness cease.

Our gathering around the manger reminds us that Christ is indeed the proper focus of this day. Despite many people finding any number of ways to detract from him. Despite any number of people who will observe a form of Christmas but will place a tree, or Santa, or a family gathering, or a table laden for Christmas lunch at the centre of their celebrations. And however nice these things are, they – all them – lose all meaning without reference to the child lying in the manger.

But *who* is this child? *Why* is he the centre of our celebration today? *Why* is he deserving of our worship, adoration and praise? Well, these questions have been the subject of 2000 years of sustained reflection. They are the questions the New Testament writers all wrestle with. *Who is this person Jesus?* And in answering it they throw everything they have at their disposal to make sense of who Jesus is. The short-hand conclusion of their reflections is distilled in the Creed we have just recited. So wondrous the mystery we recall in the Creed, we kneel: *Was incarnate of the virgin Mary and was made man. God in his fullness – light from light, true God from true God – takes form in the womb of the Virgin Mary and is born in the babe of Bethlehem.*

One of the key ways the New Testament writers help us get to that conclusion was by looking at the sacred scriptures they inherited. Their encounter with the person of Jesus led them to revisit their scriptures and to read them in a new light. And in what we call the Old Testament they saw all these ways which seemed to indicate him, which pointed to him. Sometimes in shadowy form, sometimes more clearly. And hundreds of prophecies scattered right through the Old Testament direct us to Jesus, to help us *make sense* of who he is. Who Jesus is and how we make sense of him can only be done in the light of Israel's faith and Israel's scriptures.

But in the gospel placed before us today, we see at least one writer broaden the horizon. In seeking to answer the question - *who is Jesus? why is important? why is he deserving of our adoration and praise?* - the evangelist John, yes, looked to his Jewish inheritance, but also beyond it. The gospel reading every year for Christmas morning is taken from the opening verses of John's Gospel. It would not have passed your attention that there is no mention of Mary or Joseph or even of a baby! There is no mention of shepherds or angels. Those stories the church placed before us last night. But this morning, a poetic meditation on the person of Jesus which addresses head-on: *who is this?*

*In the beginning was the Word.* This is the very opening line, the very first words of John's entire Gospel. In our English just six words. But those six words are packed with the most remarkable response to the question of who Jesus is. This bold opening is of course drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, it is a direct reference to the very first words of the entire bible, from Genesis, *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* The evangelist here is signaling that the story he will tell is the story of a new beginning, a new creation.

We are meant to understand here that God's act of creation is not locked into some far-distant past. In Jesus, God's creative word *continues* to speak. In Jesus, God is saying, *Let there be light, let there be life.* You will remember that in the Genesis story of creation, God speaks, and creation is enacted. The claim here is that Jesus is the Word God speaks. Because God is perfect, when he speaks his Word, it is a perfect expression of himself. His Word is not a diminished or reduced 'part' of God, but God in his fullness. John confirms this point: *The Word was with God and the Word was God.*

But when John refers to Jesus as the Word - *logos* in Greek - he is not simply looking to his own scriptures and the religious tradition he inherited. He in fact draws upon centuries of philosophical thought that had circled around this word *logos*.

Heraclitus lived and worked in Ephesus in the later 6th/early 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. For Heraclitus, the *logos* provided the link between rational discourse and the world's rational structure. *Logos* was like a universal law that unites the cosmos. Aristotle in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC gave *logos* a technical definition. Aristotle saw that the *logos* enables human beings to perform as no other animal can; it makes it possible for us to perceive and make clear to others through reasoned discourse the difference between what is helpful and what is harmful, between what is just and what is unjust, and between what is good and what is evil.

For Stoic philosophers from about 300 BC the *logos* was the active reason pervading the Universe. As the operative principle of the world, the *logos* was the animating force behind all things.

And Philo, a Jew living in the Greek city of Alexandria in Northern Africa writing in the first half of the first century, (that is, in the very echo of the New Testament itself) used the term *logos* to mean an intermediary divine being. Philo argued that intermediary beings were necessary to bridge the enormous gap between God and the world. The *logos*, he said, was the highest of these beings, and was called by Philo "*the first-born of God*". He also wrote that "*the Logos of the living God is the bond of everything, holding all things together and binding all the parts, and prevents them from being dissolved and separated.*" But the impossible leap for the Greeks was to imagine that the *logos* might take on human flesh. It remained inconceivable that the *logos* might communicate itself as one of us.

Still, the evangelist John drew upon the wealth of that tradition, and the tradition of the Hebrew scriptures to make sense of who Jesus is. One that anchors the birth of Jesus amongst a particular people, and a particular place, and a particular time. The other locates Jesus as the fulfillment of the entire human quest for meaning, the One in whom all human searching and restlessness is satisfied.

Two noble and ancient traditions coalesce and lead us to see that at Christmas we do not celebrate just one birth among so many births. Not just the longing of one people. Not just the fulfillment of the long-promised Jewish messiah. Not just the object of hope the prophets. But there, in the manger, we are meant to see the very agent of creation. The voice - the Word - that spoke all things into existence. Christian faith affirms - and what we celebrate today - is that in the manger is the reason, logic, order and very heartbeat of the entire cosmos. As the prayer of blessing for the crib says, *and here behold the mighty God of thunders lying helpless on the straw.*

Christmas tells us that the mind, pattern and plan of the Logos is not just an idea. And not just a force or energy. This Word has taken flesh. The mind, pattern, and plan of God is made known in a Person. The person Jesus born so that we might *know* God, and not simply *think* about him. Is this not the wonder, the miracle, of Christmas? Is this not something truly worthy of our complete devotion and attention? Is this not a mystery so compelling and wondrous that all other distractions and diversions must be put in their place? Because here – here – is not just a baby. Here we do not just celebrate the child who grew up to become an impressive, interesting, and inspiring man. But here, the God of all, the creator of all things who even now seeks to speak to you – and to us all – a new word of Life. Amen.