

Full of grace and truth

A sermon preached by Licensed Lay Minister Tony Lemon on 3 January 2016 at St Peter's Wolvercote on the reading St John 1, 1-14 especially v.14 (part) 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth.'

When my family lived in Norfolk in the late 1960s, it often fell to me to read the prologue to St. John's gospel at the carol service in our village chapel. Ever since then this passage has been my favourite Bible reading. I was pleased to find that William Barclay describes the first chapter of St. John as 'one of the greatest adventures of religious thought ever achieved by the mind of man'. My own reaction to the passage was essentially spontaneous and instinctive: it just seemed, in an extraordinarily concise and inspiring way, to be an all-embracing statement of essential Christian faith. It is clear yet profound, specific yet universal in time, space and culture.

John clearly wants us to see his book as the story of God and the world – 'in the beginning' – not just the story of one character in one place and time. Similarly Paul in Ephesians speaks of God choosing us in Christ 'before the foundation of the world'. Both direct us on things beyond human understanding: as Bishop John Robinson famously expressed it in the 1960s, 'ultimate reality' – something that is timelessly expressed in the words of the hymn, 'Of the Father's love begotten':

'He is Alpha and Omega, He the Source, the Ending He,
of the things that are, that have been, and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore.'

The Word challenged the darkness before creation and now challenges the darkness that is found, tragically, within creation itself – as the Queen noted in her recent Christmas address, drawing attention to verse 5 of John's Prologue: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

John's Gospel is a story about the creator God acting in a new way within the creation that he loves: about the long human story reaching its intended climax. It will do this through 'the Word'. In Genesis the climax is the creation of humans, made in God's image. In John, the climax is the arrival of a human being, the Word made flesh. In the Old Testament, God regularly acts by means of his 'word', as in Isaiah chapter 55 (vv.10-11) where God's revelation pierces the darkness to bring light, life, healing and hope to Israel and the whole creation. This is part of what lies behind John's choice of 'Word' here – it's a way of telling us who Jesus really is, in terms that bring together what is old and familiar to the Jews – looking back to the prophets, to saints and pioneers who brought truth, reflecting God's light amidst a darkness which exists not only in people's hearts but in the whole ordered system of nature. John probably expected some of his readers to see that what the prologue says about Jesus is just what some Old Testament writers had said about 'Wisdom'. Both 'Word' and 'Wisdom' are the light of man. Perhaps the best illustration of this comes from Proverbs, chapter 8, which personifies 'Wisdom' as the creation of the Lord at the beginning of his work of creation – 'Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth'. Wisdom had the same light-giving function, the same creative power that John attributed to the Word, the *Logos*, with which he identified Jesus Christ. Between the Old Testament and the New, men continued to produce this kind of writing which is known as Wisdom Literature, drawing from the experience of wise men to produce a guide for life. This literature includes two books, both from the Apocrypha and written about 100 B.C: Ecclesiasticus

– ‘Wisdom was created before all other things’ (1,v.4) and the Wisdom of Solomon, where wisdom can do all things and makes all things new (7,v.27). In both books, wisdom and the word are brought together as one and the same, as in John’s Prologue, embodying the idea of the creative and illuminating power of God.

So far we have been thinking about what John’s Prologue would have meant to Jews, familiar with the Jewish scriptures. But John, living in Ephesus about the year 100 A.D., was concerned that his message should also reach the Greeks. How could he construct it in a way that predisposed the Greeks to receive it? This could hardly be achieved by routing them through unfamiliar Jewish Messianic ideas. The Greek words for ‘*In the beginning*’ also mean ‘*In principle*’ – so to Greeks these words would convey not just the beginning of time, but the *root of the universe*. Greeks shared with Jews a conception of the Word, although to Greeks it meant something quite different. Brilliantly, John’s Prologue speaks to both. The Greek term for *word* is *Logos* – but *Logos* means both word and *reason*. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus had used *Logos* to mean the word, the *reason* of God: to Heraclitus this explained the principle of order under which the universe continued to exist, and also power that gave human beings reason, knowledge of truth and the ability to judge between right and wrong: the *Logos* was the mind of God controlling the world and every person in it. The Jewish philosopher Philo studied the wisdom of both the Jewish and Greek worlds, and said that the *Logos* was the thought of God stamped upon the world. So John in his Prologue was using the Word both to speak to the Jews in terms of their Messianic understanding and to the Greeks in terms of this concept of the *Logos*, telling them that the *Logos*, the ruling fact of the universe and self-expression of God, was revealed in Jesus, the Word made flesh. In this way he introduces to both cultures the main theme of his gospel: if you want to know who the true God is, look long and hard at Jesus.

In Jesus we see the creating word and the reason of God taking manhood upon himself. When the Word was made flesh it was ‘full of grace and truth.’ Grace because it was undeserved – an act of pure love and limitless kindness. And grace too in the sense of the loveliness of God, rather than the common image of might, majesty and judgement. The Word was full of truth because Jesus embodied truth – ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’ (John 14, 6); because he communicated the truth – he told Pilate that he came into the world to witness to the truth; and because when he left the world, he left us the Spirit to guide us into truth.

All too often the truth is unrecognised – as it was, tragically, by God’s own people, Israel. The Jews were as completely unable to receive the Word made flesh as any other peoples had been unable to receive light fuller than that to which their culture and faith had accustomed them. John’s Gospel brings a universal, inclusive message – ‘to *all* who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God’ (v.12) – *all*, regardless of birth, culture, ethnicity or race. John’s Gospel portrays a great drama of God and the world, of Jesus and Israel, of the Word made flesh who reveals God’s glory. But it is a drama in search of actors, now as it was when John wrote, and there are parts in this drama for everyone. We all have a role, if we are willing to play it.