

## **NOT CONFIDENTIAL**

*A short talk first given by Dr Alan Branford as part of a Progressive Christianity Service held at Adelaide West Uniting Church, South Australia, on Wednesday, 21 November 2018*

# **The Word Became Flesh**

## **– The Gospel of John, Chapter 1: Nativity Postponed**

*by Dr Alan Branford (© 21 November 2018)*

### **Preliminary Readings**

#### **Isaiah 42:1-4**

- <sup>1</sup> “Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen one in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him,  
and he will bring justice to the nations.  
<sup>2</sup> He will not shout or cry out,  
or raise his voice in the streets.  
<sup>3</sup> A bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.  
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;  
<sup>4</sup> he will not falter or be discouraged  
till he establishes justice on earth.  
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”  
*(Isaiah 42:1-4, New International Version)*

#### **John 1:1-5**

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. <sup>4</sup> In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

*(John 1:1-5, New International Version)*

## Preliminary Hymn

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,  
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,  
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;  
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above  
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all life Thou givest, to both great and small;  
In all life Thou livest, the true life of all;  
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,  
And wither and perish, but nought changeth Thee.

Great Father of Glory, pure Father of Light  
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;  
All laud we would render, O help us to see:  
'Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee.

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,  
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.

## Short Talk

### John 1:14

<sup>14</sup> 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.

*(John 1:14, New International Version)*

<sup>14</sup> Καὶ ὁ **λόγος** σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας.

After only thirteen verses, John the Evangelist has gone straight to the very heart of the matter: the second part of the Trinity of God. God, the Ground of all Being, has manifested himself among us as God the Son, human, flesh and blood like the rest of us.

It is important to note that when John 1:14 says “The Word”, the Gospel in its Ancient Greek text uses “logos” (λόγος), meaning “reasoned discourse”, not the grammatical term “word” which is “lexis” (λέξις). This Ancient Greek word “logos” (λόγος) may be found in modern English in terms such as “biology”, “geology”, etc. The distinction between “logos” and “lexis” is important, as “logos” indicates the deep nature of God, as we saw in the earlier reading of John 1:1-4. Indeed, the transliteration of λόγος, The Logos, is often used instead of the translation, The Word, to mean the Christ.

The problem, as it were, is that God, by definition, is ineffable. This is why we earlier sang together the hymn, “Immortal, invisible, God only wise. In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.” Mankind has evolved and matured to the point that it has abandoned primitive notions of a pantheon of gods, used to explain natural phenomena to the unsophisticated mind, and now has developed a concept of a monotheistic, abstract God. But mankind still struggles to understand the Will of this ineffable God, and hence God sends The Logos.

Another crucial point in John 1:14 is that the Word became *flesh*. You may recall the words in the Nicene Creed: “begotten, not made”. Jesus is a *person*.

Despite the fact that the Evangelist never gets around to giving us the names of all of the Twelve Disciples, he nonetheless devotes John 1:43-51 to telling us a story concerning the calling of two of them. Philip is one of John the Baptist’s disciples and was originally a fisherman from Bethsaida, a fishing village on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee; Jesus calls Philip to follow him. Philip seeks out his brother Nathanael and says to him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael sceptically responds, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael then goes to meet Jesus and is soon convinced that Philip spoke accurately.

Why did the Evangelist take the trouble to narrate this story? It illustrates that God the Son has not come as a High Priest or a nobleman. Rather, he is the son of a common carpenter from a backwater town in Galilee. Jesus is an everyman!

Jesus, the Son of God, lives as a person, shares our dreams and our failures, experiences our joy and our grief, has our strengths and our flaws and weaknesses. But also being God, he is uniquely placed to baptize us in the Holy Spirit.

John 1:14 supports this claim. Jesus is described as “full of grace and truth”. “Grace” may be defined as “the influence or spirit of God operating in humans to regenerate or strengthen them”. In other words, Jesus is able to fill people with the Holy Spirit. He also is able to provide the people with an understanding of God’s Will, namely truth.

The opening verses of John Chapter 1 further cement the catholic Trinitarian view that the tripartite God is eternal: God the Father, God the Son – the Logos – and God the Holy Spirit are three forms of the One. Recall from our earlier Gospel reading John 1:2, “<sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning.” (*John 1:2, New International Version*) The notion that God the Son, the Logos, has existed for all eternity before the coming of Jesus, though, is something most people still have a problem getting their heads around.

But matters are much messier than even this. Everyone from theologians to thieves has spent the last two millennia in a logical whirlpool over the resolution of Jesus both as a person and as divine.

In the early centuries of Christendom, there had been many schisms as the theology of the new religion evolved. One of the most serious threats to the catholic view of Christianity came from the Arian Heresy.

Arius was a Presbyter of Alexandria in the fourth century CE and promulgated the following view. “Jesus Christ was not co-eternal and of one substance with God the Father, but had been created by Him at a specific time as his Instrument for the salvation of the world. Thus, although a perfect man, the Son must always be subordinate to the Father, his nature being human rather than divine.” (Norwich, John Julius (1988) “Byzantium – The Early Centuries”, Chapter 2 (Viking/Penguin))

The Arian view spread rapidly and became a serious threat to the catholic Trinitarian view of God. The Roman Emperor Constantine the Great cared little for these theological niceties, but he saw the need to resolve the issue. It was largely this schism which caused him to call what has become known as the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. The Council decided in favour of the catholic Trinitarian view, but what was now officially the Arian *Heresy* took a long time to decline.

What is also of great interest and surprise is the extent to which theological arguments were of passionate importance to ordinary folk of the culturally Greek world. “Broadsheets were distributed; rabble-rousing speeches were made in the market place; slogans were chalked on walls. Everyone had an opinion: you were either for Arius or against him. ... (Arius) had actually written several popular songs and jingles – for sailors, travellers, carpenters and other trades – which were sung and whistled in the streets.” (Norwich, John Julius (1988) “Byzantium – The Early Centuries”, Chapter 2 (Viking/Penguin))

The paradox of simultaneous divinity and humanity blew up again in the fifth century CE. In 427 CE, Nestorius became Bishop of Constantinople. He claimed to be a Trinitarian and an

adherent to the Council of Nicaea, but with a novel twist. “Nestorius preached that Christ was not ... a single person – both God and Man – but that he possessed two distinct persons, one human and the other divine. ‘I cannot speak of God,’ he wrote, ‘as being two or three months old’; in other words he refused to attribute the frailties inseparable from human life to a member of the Trinity.” (Norwich, John Julius (1988) “Byzantium – The Early Centuries”, Chapter 7 (Viking/Penguin))

Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria, led the anti-Nestorians (which to some extent was simply rivalry between the two Patriarchates, Alexandria the older and Constantinople the now more influential). The matter gave rise to the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE, in which Cyril’s catholic stance won out.

Another important verse in this section of John Chapter 1 is

**John 1:17**

<sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

*(John 1:17, New International Version)*

This may be seen as asserting the dominance of the New Testament over the Mosaic Law, which has important implications in a number of debates about morality.

Many commentators call John 1:1-18 “The Prologue”. It is not hard to see why. It is largely a statement of theological ideas. The text now changes to a more narrative form as we are introduced to John the Baptist and we are given an account of the birth of Jesus’ ministry.

There are no stories of mangers, shepherds and Wise Men from the East in this Gospel. As Christmas approaches, we turn our minds to the commemoration of the birth of Jesus. The familiar Nativity stories of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke make for cute Nativity plays for the children. But should we in fact be commemorating a Nativity of another kind – the birth of Jesus’ ministry – as an event of far more import – “Nativity Postponed”?

A man known to history as John the Baptist had gathered a deal of fame, and a number of followers, by baptizing people with water. Specifically, he was baptizing in the River Jordan at a place called Bethany, on the eastern side of the river just north of where it enters the Dead Sea.

The origins of John the Baptist are unknown, but there are many speculations, most without a shred of supporting evidence. One that appeals to me is that John had been part of the Essene community at Qumran on the north-western shore of the Dead Sea about fifteen kilometres from Bethany. The Essenes are held by many to have been a third Jewish sect of that age, the other two being the better-known Pharisees and Sadducees. The Essenes lived in communes and practised a strict religious observance that included a ritualized daily immersion in water. This fact is the obvious suggestion of a connection to John the Baptist.

John the Baptist steadfastly claimed that he was “not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet”. I have here used the words of the priests and the Levites who had been sent by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to interrogate John the Baptist as to who he was. This event is chronicled in John 1:19-28. In particular, John the Baptist’s response was

### **John 1:23**

<sup>23</sup> John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

*(John 1:23, New International Version)*

The reference to the words of Isaiah the prophet is

### **Isaiah 40:3**

<sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling:

"In the wilderness prepare

the way for the Lord;

make straight in the desert

a highway for our God."

*(Isaiah 40:3, New International Version)*

There was a day whose eternal significance cannot be overstated, and I think that the description of what happened that day is best left to the Evangelist:

### **John 1:29-34**

<sup>29</sup> The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! <sup>30</sup> This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' <sup>31</sup> I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

<sup>32</sup> Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. <sup>33</sup> And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>34</sup> I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."

*(John 1:29-34, New International Version)*

Note that John the Baptist recognized Jesus as the latter approached, as the dove descended and settled on Jesus. This happened *before* John baptized Jesus with water. The Holy Spirit pointed out the Christ to John the Baptist by this vision of a dove descending and settling on Jesus. John the Baptist then baptized Jesus the Christ with water.

The phrase "who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me" in verse 30 could be argued to be a reference to the eternal nature of The Logos. Also note that verse 34 is a reference to our earlier Old Testament reading Isaiah 42:1, "1 'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, // my chosen one in whom I delight; // I will put my Spirit on him, // and he will bring justice to the nations.'" *(Isaiah 42:1, New International Version)*

John the Baptist baptized people with water. But now The Logos was on the earth in the form of Jesus the Christ and he baptized people with the Holy Spirit.

A number, not specified, of disciples of John the Baptist now became disciples of Jesus the Christ. Among their number included at least four of those who later constituted The Twelve Disciples. These were Andrew, Simon his brother, and Philip and his brother Nathanael. It was not until an incident described in Chapter 6 of the Gospel that the number of disciples settled as The Twelve.

Jesus the Christ immediately recognized Simon as a natural leader and nicknamed him his 'rock'. The word for 'rock' in Aramaic is transliterated as Cephas. In Ancient Greek, the word for 'rock' is transliterated as 'petros' (πέτρος) and from this we get the English name Peter. Simon is henceforth known to us as Simon Peter and eventually just as Peter.

Jesus, and the disciples thus far collected, head off to Galilee and Jesus the Christ's three-year ministry begins. A Nativity that *should* be commemorated.

AMEN

## Questions for discussion after the Talk

1. What does John the Evangelist mean in John 1: 12-13?  
*<sup>12</sup> Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - <sup>13</sup>children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*
2. When did Jesus become God the Son, i.e. divine: at his conception, at his birth, at his baptism by John the Baptist, ...?
3. Why are there apparently no parables in the Gospel of John?