

Word – Light – Flesh **Sermon on John 1: 1-5 & 14-18**

Unlike Matthew and Luke, the evangelists Mark and John don't have a Xmas story at the beginning of their gospels. Mark's gospel starts with Jesus meeting John the Baptist in the desert. That is what we looked at in the sermon last Sunday. And John has very philosophical, even theoretical, complicated stuff for us, at the start of his gospel.

Unlike Matthew, John does not tell of the wise men and star. And unlike Luke, he does not tell of the manger, the angels and the shepherds. He does not mention the birth of a child, nor the young woman Mary. No baby, no Joseph, no visit to Elizabeth's – nothing of that sort at all.

What John has for us is "the word becoming flesh and living among us..." (1:14). And with this he is probably just as close to the Xmas message as Luke and Matthew are with their stories of a tiny baby in whom God comes to us.

However – since John's story of the beginning of Jesus' life and journey seems so un-christmassy, the lectionary with its suggestions for the texts for Sunday sermons only lets us look at texts from John's gospel in the middle of January. By now the angels are silent again, the star is gone, the kings and wise men are home, the shepherds are back with their flocks... and now "real" life begins again, or: as a beautiful poem says "the work of Xmas begins..." – which is in John's words: the wonder that the word became flesh, that God became a human being. A challenge that asks us to respond in faith – nothing more and nothing less.

John paints the coming of Jesus in the boldest colours. For whereas for Matthew and Luke the town of Bethlehem is the scene of Jesus' coming into the world, for John the universe is the stage. Instead of the image of the baby in the manger, John uses a philosophical image that was familiar to any thinking person of his day. "The word becomes flesh!"

The term "the word" doesn't ring much of a bell for us today. But for John's readers it was a term of enormous significance. It is no exaggeration to say that it was an "international" term with connotations rooted deep in the thinking of people he lived with. When they heard the term "word" they almost immediately thought of God and God's wisdom. People knew that God cannot be seen, but they all believed that God could be experienced through "the word".

Choosing, as I said, such an international term for God, shows us that John believed that the coming of God was of cosmic, worldwide significance.

"His" Jesus still came as a first century Jew and lived among Jews. He walked on the dry and dusty roads of Palestine, but Jesus cannot and could not be limited to a particular culture or nation or time within history.

John's Jesus is "the word", - is God – and as such has significance to all people of all time. He was important then, and he is important now.

In Jesus, John wants to tell us, we meet God. In Jesus all our longings for God are met. Jesus is God's way of expressing himself and showing us who and how he is.

Let's listen to the first sentences of John's gospel again:

***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.
What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (1:1-5).***

Most stories begin with a sense of “once upon a time”, with a sense of beginning somewhere in the past. John’s story of Jesus begins with a sense of “once before time...”, in the beginning, before time ever was, was the “word”... God, and in him Jesus, was even there before creation took place. God, and in him Jesus, existed before time began. They are over all, or in all, around all... long before the birth of the human being Jesus, which we celebrate at Xmas, took place.

Understanding all this is a bit of a struggle, don’t you agree? But I think this is exactly the point which John wants us at. We are dealing here with mystery. John’s gospel is full of mysteries. As if he wanted to tell us that dealing with God, believing in God, living a life of faith only works with mysteries, beyond our understanding and comprehension.

The person who can show us best who God is, is Jesus.
The person who can tell us best what God’s love, God’s heart, God’s mind are like, is Jesus. Jesus, John declares, knows all there is to know about God. Jesus is, therefore, the one person in all the universe who can reveal to us what God is like. And: he is one with God... “...the word was God”.
With such terms and thoughts John teaches us to live with mystery, to develop the capacity to accept the indescribable and simply believe.

Some chapters further on in his gospel John lets Jesus say: ***“No one comes to the father except through me.”***

And he means: without Jesus we may exist, but we do not truly live. Only in Jesus do we truly come alive. And whether we are truly alive or not has to do with whether we believe or not. John wrote his whole gospel, so that we – and many others – may come to believe, and that through believing we may have life in Jesus’ name...

In Jesus alone, according to John, “life” & “light” can be found.

As much as the term “word” meant something to the people of John’s day, so the term “light” rang a bell for them.

With “darkness” John describes the world we live in, then and now: frightening, insecure, harsh, unwelcoming, uncaring, dangerous... against such a reality John portrays Jesus as the “light of the world”.

Jesus is the one who comes among us, shares what it means to be truly human, and shows us the truth about God... Not about a God far away from us, to whom we would have to reach up! No. ...but about a God who has come to us, reached out to us and holds us safe. God wants to take away our fears and worries, he is waiting for us, longing for us, forgiving us... and – on the cross that is – giving himself for us.

The light Jesus brings us, cannot be overcome by darkness! It walks ahead of us, and is with us, as was the pillar of fire which went before the children of Israel as they journeyed through the desert. And all Jews knew this story so well:

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, «If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.»

So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle.

And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, «God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.»

They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness.

The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night.

Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. (Ex 13: 17-22).

Jesus guides us through the desert of life.

For the Jews in John's time this was a meaningful picture, not just because of their history, but also because of their geography. It was so easy to lose the track and get lost – in more than one way... But with Jesus people were given hope to find the way to life... – real life, as God wants it for every individual human being who ever lived, who is living now, and who ever will live on this earth.

Jesus' light shines in the darkness, and we are asked to keep following it.

John wrote his gospel 70 or 80 years after Jesus' death, and still he writes in the present tense: the light shines... Not "the light shone" when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, when he went around Galilee doing good, and when he gave his life for us in Jerusalem; the light still shines...! It continues to shine today.

Nobody has been able to put out the light of Jesus, John rejoices. This is the good news for a world in dark and sin, in war and violence, in injustice and peacelessness... a world in trouble here and there.

Nobody is able to put out the light of love and peace and grace! Good news for all of us here. Good news for all the trouble spots of the world. Good news for the worried, the weak and the broken hearted: at the end of the tunnel there is a way out, and there is light!

Jesus said: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (8:12).

A third great word in the first chapter of John's gospel is "flesh".

"And the word became flesh."

This was new and provocative in John's time. For the philosophers of his day "the word" (which is God) would never become flesh. This was new. Unheard of.

A revolution in the thinking of John's contemporaries.

God in human form – how extraordinary... and mysterious again. John just seems to like them: the mysteries, the indescribable, the surprising and revolutionary.

God has come among us.

...and it does not matter whether we tell each other such wonderful news in nativity stories, or as John does, in philosophical sentences.

It may help to get some easier access to John's complicated thought by sharing a story with you:

“One summer night a young mother tucked her small daughter into bed, while outside lightening flashed and thunder shook the house. After finally getting her daughter settled, the mother went downstairs and tried to read a book, but the storm kept up. Her daughter lay in bed as long as she could, but finally she jumped out of bed, ran downstairs and threw herself into her mother's arms. “Mummy, I'm afraid”, she said.

Her mother held and comforted her, and then the two of them walked upstairs.

The mother went back downstairs. But five minutes later the little girl stood at the foot of the stairs: “Mummy, I'm still afraid.”

Her mother replied: “Darling, I've told you that you have to get your sleep. You're perfectly safe. God loves you and he'll take care of you.”

Her daughter replied: “I know that God loves me. But Mummy, when it's thundering and lightning outside, I want someone with skin on to love me.”

The main message of John – however complicated it may sound in John's words – is that someone with skin on has come to love us.

When the storm roars around us, and the lightning flashes, we don't need to panic and fall into despair, because God has come to us “with skin on”.

And God keeps coming to us “with skin on” in the people who show us their love. (You know as well as I do how much we all need this: to experience God's love through the people around us, through what they do and say...)

Jesus is God's word of love for the world. And many more words of love have been spoken ever since through those who followed Jesus and remained in his light.

God does love us – he loves you and me. He's always loved us, and will always love us. God has declared his love for us in the birth of Jesus – and the word became flesh...!

And ever since, there is love on earth beyond measure.

Does anybody love me? You may ask today. And the answer is: Yes. God does! And we all, God's beloved sons and daughters, are constantly trying to show you that... to show it to each other, that God wants to put his arms around us and love us for all eternity.

This is the good news John comes to us with.

This is the gift God comes to us with.

But like any other gift, it needs to be received.

We need to accept God's offer of love and life, hold out to him our empty hands and let them be filled with wonder, love and grace.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him... may have eternal life.” (3:16).

...eternal love

...eternal grace

to pass on to those we live with,

so that each and every one of us can experience God in “someone with skin on to love us.”

Amen.

Prayer

Gracious God
for your love for us
gentle as a shower
healing our pain
binding our wounds
we give you thanks.

For your love for us
sure as the dawn
transforming our darkness
revealing your truth
we give thanks.

For your love for us
mercifully steadfast
calling us to you
raising us up
we give you thanks.

For your love for us
enabling us to love others
we give you thanks.
Amen.