

The Word Became Flesh

John 1:1-14

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Once upon a time, long, long ago... people used to exchange Christmas cards! Remember that? Now we have e-messages wishing you, not a *Blessed Christmas*, but a de-Christianised *Best wishes for the festive season*.

But some kind people still send Christmas cards. I remember one card I received a few years ago. There were two interesting things about that card:

- One, the sender forgot to say who he or she was!
- And two: the picture on the front was of a luminous infant-Jesus beaming light upward and onto inward-leaning Mary and Joseph — a picture expressing the verse we've just heard: *The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world*.

Christmas cards, in picture and verse, condense so much — hopefully the truth about our Lord, and the love and regard of the sender, all on a thin piece of card folded in half. They're a kind of parable of the incarnation of our Lord. The package is familiar and within our grasp — the card: a human baby, pudgy arms and legs, soft squishy face — cute! So we have no trouble with the 'in the flesh' side of '*The Word became flesh*'.

But what about what that flesh contains? And what about the person sending the card, the relationship behind its coming and the message it conveys — the 'Word' side of '*The Word became flesh*'?

The gospel according to Mark, thought to have been the first written, begins the story of Jesus with his baptism by John. The gospel according to Matthew, focusing on a Jewish audience, says, No, we need to go further back than that, and so gives a genealogy tracing Jesus back to Abraham. The gospel according to Luke, written for Gentiles, has Jesus' genealogy going back to Adam — the common ancestor of us all.

But the gospel according to John, written last and with particular attention to Jesus' full identity, says actually we have to go all the way back to the very first verse of the Bible: 'In the beginning'.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

So John chapter 1 verse 1 goes, In the beginning was Jesus — but of course John doesn't use the name 'Jesus' because this was only given at his birth, as the angel Gabriel instructed Mary and Joseph.

So what name then, for his being before being Jesus? Well, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John says, *In the beginning was 'the Word'* — not *In the beginning God created the Word*, mind you, because he's never been created but always has been — so *In the beginning was the Word*, and even more, John says in his rich poem:

*The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.*

What is this 'Word' then? Well, the rest of John's gospel shows us — but we already have a clue in the name itself, which in Greek is Logos. It's there in our description of the sciences: biology, physiology, psychology — even logic.

Someone's neatly coined its meaning as, *The reason why*. So biology is the reason why plants behave as they do; physiology is the reason why our bodies function as they do; psychology is the reason why our brains react the way they do; and logic is the reason why one conclusion flows from another as they do.

But what about Jesus as Logos? Well, to put it most profoundly, *Jesus is the reason why everything!* As John goes on, *Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.* And then, most amazingly, a little later, *The Word became flesh.*

The omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal, Creator God broke the barrier between creature and creator, and burst through the gates of heaven to condense himself into the flesh of a human child, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. This is the astonishing Christmas gospel.

Malcolm Muggeridge, in his old but excellent book, *Jesus*, says:

Hold in your mind the entire universe with all its planetary systems within systems and ultimate vistas of everlasting space; hold in your soul the contemplation of the creator of it all, the spirit which animates it all, the beginning and the end of what has no beginning and no end... Then pinpoint it all, bring it to focus, concentrate it all in a Man — and that man is Jesus. (*Jesus*, p 29)

This is the glorious good news of the incarnation — that God the Son, the great eternally-begotten, word-speaking, self-revealing God-from-God, Light-from-Light, true-God-from-true-God, of-one-being-with-the-Father progeny by which God the Father made the world, himself has taken on human flesh and become one of us!

We are not big enough to know God or to reach up to him, and there are impenetrable barriers in the way — angels guarding the gates of Eden — so God the Son broke through these, making himself small enough to live here among us so that he himself could reach out to us — the eternal Word become human flesh.

But in his Christmas poem John also says this:

The true light that gives light to everyone
was coming into the world.
He was in the world,
and though the world was made through him,
the world did not recognise him.
He came to that which was his own,
but his own did not receive him.

While the Word-in-the flesh came to shine new light into the sad and sorry world made dark by idolatry and sin, the Word finds no room in the inn — a 'Not Welcome' sign on the door of those he came to save.

And this is especially so in these latter days of the so-called 'Enlightenment' — these last few centuries in which the Western mind has pushed out the once-common recognition of God's existence. Human life is presumed to be an accident now, not a wonderful gift imparted and continually sustained by a divine and loving Creator. 'God is dead' said Friedrich Nietzsche, and many believe it. Jesus might have been placed in a manger, but we've collectively turfed him out with the dung.

Even some Christians see Jesus as little more than a good example for better living, as so many public Christmas messages say.

Malcolm Muggeridge again comments caustically — in words hard to hear this holy night:

In humanistic times like ours, a contemporary virgin — assuming there are any such — would regard a message from the Angel Gabriel that she might expect to give birth to a son to be called the Son of the Highest as ill-tidings of great sorrow and a slur on the local family-planning centre. It is, in point of fact, extremely improbable under existing conditions that Jesus would have been permitted to be born at all. Mary's pregnancy, in poor circumstances and with the father unknown, would have been an obvious case for an abortion; and her talk of having conceived by the Holy Ghost would have pointed to the need for psychiatric treatment and made the case for terminating her pregnancy even stronger. Thus our generation, needing a Saviour more perhaps than any that has ever existed, would be too humane to allow one to be born; too enlightened to permit the Light of the World to shine in a darkness that grows ever more oppressive. (*Jesus*, p 19)

Human words — many, many human words, with their self-made reasons why — have displaced God's Logos at this point in human history.

Words — good words — are formed and received in silence. They are interruptions to silence — whether rippling still air, or dotting a blank page or screen, and before that, waking the unconscious mind. Words are thoughts expressed, and thoughts are logos — the ordering of the human mind, just as the Logos in John's poem is the expression of God's ordered mind, powerfully speaking creation into being.

But when all the silence is already filled, when all the air is constantly agitated by mankind's self-important speech, when all the pages and screens are smothered with proud and boastful blurb, then the divine word of grace and truth is not heard by us.

Be still and know that I am God, he says in Psalm 46.

So it was that the divine Word came to an open-hearted country girl called Mary, and a quiet and reflective Joseph — we don't hear a single word from him anywhere in the New Testament. So it was that the divine Word came to shepherds out in silent night. So it was that the divine Word came to John the Baptist in the wilderness — and came from John to others in the wilderness too.

The divine Word of God didn't come to Herod in his palace, or to the Roman Governor in his office, or to the chief priests in their temple — they were probably all too busy in a meeting. And the divine Word of God is being shut out of the Enlightenment West, because we have become an *Enlourdenment* West more than anything else.

And yet — here's the wonder of it all — the Word still came. The origin of all light still entered this dark world; the thinker of all truth and the speaker of incomparable grace still came into this deafening cacophony.

For the sake of the very people who scoff at the idea of his existence, the pure Son of God was happy to be born of a rough and probably illiterate country girl, whose homespun clothes may not have been washed for weeks! So that God could save children of all kinds from the folly and evil of their parents, the eternal Word was happy to be wrapped in rags in a smelly feed box.

With righteous deeds no better than filthy rags ourselves, we and the world we live in, make little or no room for Jesus. Yet if a mangy heart is the only thing on offer, the Christmas gospel is that he'll take it! In fact he's vitally interested in what's dark and filthy so that he can, by his own person and presence, make it bright and clean — sins forgiven, life regained. And in the end, it's he

who is making a brand-new home for us, so that when the time comes for those who trust in him, there most definitely will be room in the inn!

Then the frustration of trying to condense so much of ourselves and our inadequate faith into those Christmas cards will be well and truly over. Then the sounds which fill the silence and the words which leap from page and screen will be so beautiful and good, so true and of such grace that we will wonder why we didn't pay attention sooner. And then we too will find all the words we need to praise the eternal Word come in the flesh.

So we finish with the closing strophe of John's poem:

The Word became flesh
and dwelt among us.
We have seen his glory,
the glory of the One and Only coming from the Father,
of grace and truth...
And from the fullness of his grace
we have all received grace upon grace.
Amen.