



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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What Child is This?

St. John 1:1-18

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December 24, 2009 – Christmas Eve

Before we prayed the collect and heard the lessons, we sang in the carol:

*What child is this, who, laid to rest,
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?*

What child is this? We sang the answer in the refrain:

*This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
Haste, haste, to bring Him laud,
The Babe, the son of Mary.*

The Babe is Christ the King. But who is Christ? Why is he king? And where is his kingdom? “What child is this?” is the all-important question and depending on who you ask, you might get a host of different answers. So this evening I want to look at our Gospel lesson for the authoritative answer. Not only is the answer there Holy Spirit-inspired, but it was written by the one who knew Jesus more closely than anyone else – by St. John, the Apostle and Evangelist. In these opening verses of his gospel, he lays out for us five truths about Jesus – about the Word-made-flesh or the Word Incarnate – that we might know who he is.

The *first* truth about the Word Incarnate is that his is Jesus Christ. In verse 17 St. John tells us:

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

You’ll remember from St. Matthew’s telling of the Christmas story that “Jesus” was the name that Joseph was told to give the child, because it means “Saviour.” Matthew writes:

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her

is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (St. Matthew 1:20-21)

“Christ” was a Greek form of the Hebrew word “Messiah,” the long-awaited king of the Jews who would bring victory to the people and bear the government of the world on his shoulders, as Isaiah prophesied. Jesus’ own disciples recognised him as this Christ – as this Messiah. When Andrew, Peter’s brother, told him he had met Jesus he said, “We have found the Messiah”, and then John adds, “(which means Christ.)”

What child is this? John tells us that he is Jesus Christ. That he is Jesus the Saviour and that he is the Christ, the Messiah: the great King.

The *second* truth in these verses is that the Word Incarnate existed *as God* and *with God* before he was born in human flesh. St. John says in the first verse of our Gospel lesson:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

This just might be one of the most attacked verses of Scripture in all of history. Almost every major heresy, false doctrine, or cult is, at its core, rooted in some kind of misunderstanding of the nature of the Holy Trinity and especially of the person and nature of Jesus. This is why the early Church worked so hard to establish who God is and especially who Christ is. That’s how we got our Creeds that we recite each week. This verse has often come under attack because it states so clearly who Jesus is: that before he came to earth and took on human form, he was God. But further, that Jesus was not as God the sum total of the Godhead, but that he existed with God – with the Father – both God, the same in substance, and yet each distinct in person. Each one, the Father, and the pre-incarnate Word, existed together in unity, but also as distinct persons within the Holy Trinity.

What child is this? He’s not only man, but just as fully *God*. It’s for this reason, that when we worship Jesus Christ, we bow before him and proclaim with St. Thomas, “My Lord and my *God*.”

Now, we’ve been talking about the *Word* Incarnate. Why the “Word”? That’s the

third truth: Before he became incarnate – before he took on human flesh – John says he was called the “Word.” Again, looking at verse 1:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The fact that the Second Person of the Trinity is called the Word tells us something about God. Consider if he were called the *Deed*. “In the beginning was the *Deed*, and the *Deed* was with God, and the *Deed* was God.” Deeds speak loudly, but they don’t always speak clearly. Consider that our deeds are prone to misunderstanding, which is why we so often find ourselves explaining them *with words*. Yes, God did mighty deeds in history, but he gave priority to explaining them to us with words.

Could Jesus have been the *Thought*? “In the beginning was the *Thought*, and the *Thought* was with God, and the *Thought* was God.” That doesn’t work either. As much as our thoughts might turn outward toward others, they’re something that exist solely within us. Words, on the other hand, are something outward focused – something we specifically use to communicate with others. And that’s just what God’s *Word* does – he communicates to us and with us.

What about the *Feeling*? “In the beginning was the *Feeling*, and the *Feeling* was with God, and the *Feeling* was God.” Again, just as with our deeds, feelings aren’t always clear – they need explanation.

What child is this? This is the *Word*. This is the one who exists as God to communicate – as God to make himself known, and known clearly. The Word has existed eternally to communicate within the Holy Trinity itself, but in taking on human flesh he became divine communication to us. In the person of Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, God makes himself clearly known to us.

Fourth, all things were created through the Word. Look at verse 3:

All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

St. John tells us this for at least two reasons, the first being that it emphasises

that Jesus Christ is God. God is the Creator. He's the source and the origin of everything that exists except for himself. Whether it's a rock, a tree, the earth, the sun, the vast expanse of space, you, or me, it all comes ultimately from God as Creator. So when St. John tells us, "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made," he's telling us that Jesus – the Word – stands outside the created order – that the Word is God.

But in verse 10 John also writes:

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

John stresses the ugliness – the sinfulness – of our sin, the seriousness of the world's guilty blindness, and the greatness of the world's evil in rejecting Jesus. He is just as much our Creator as the Father is. Through him the Father created all things. And yet even as its loving creator, the world refuses to receive him.

Those are the first four truths John tells us about the Word Incarnate. First, that he is Jesus Christ, Saviour and King. Second, that he is God – the second person of the Holy Trinity. Third, that he is the Word – he is God speaking to us. And fourth, he is the Creator of all things. Now fifth: the Incarnate Word bears life in himself and that life is the light of men. John writes in verse 4:

In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

As the one who gave life to the universe in the first place, he is the one who now offers life to sinful men and women. Every one of us has two basic problems. We're all born spiritually dead, and because of our spiritual deadness, we're all therefore spiritually blind too. John tells us that Jesus is the solution to both problems. He has the life we need and his life becomes the light we that lifts our darkness.

John says in 5:21, "the Son gives life to whom he will." In other words, he does for us spiritually what he did physically for Lazarus. Remember that Jesus' friend Lazarus died, and yet Jesus stood outside his tomb and called out to the dead man,

"Lazarus, come out!" And out walked Lazarus.

How does that life that Jesus gives relate to light? It relates in two ways. First, it gives us the ability to see. When dead people are given life, they see. Changing the image a bit: when you're born, you see. It's the same spiritually speaking. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Jesus gives *life* and that life then becomes *light* – it becomes the ability to see spiritual reality.

But second, the life he gives relates to light in that Jesus is himself the light that is seen. What, after all, is the unbeliever blind to? Before we receive Jesus' life, we're blind to the truth and beauty and worth – the glory – of Jesus. So when John says, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men," he's saying that the Word Incarnate is both the power to see spiritual splendour *and* the splendour to be seen.

That's why John says in verse 14, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have *seen his glory*." This was precisely what Jesus prayed for us – for his people – in John 17:24, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory." This is what he claimed when he said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5). What child is this? This is the Word Incarnate who has life in himself and that life is the light of men. He is the power to open our eyes to splendour, but he's also the very splendour our opened eyes are to see.

Let me recap these five truths again. (1) He is in the flesh Jesus Christ – both the Saviour and the anointed King of all. (2) He is God. He was with God and he was God from eternity past. (3) He is the Word. He is God-speaking-to-us. (4) He is the Creator. All things were made through him, but he himself was not made. Again, he is God. And (5) he is life and light. He is the living power to see and the all-satisfying splendour to be seen.

Now knowing whom this child is, how do we respond to him?

Verses 10 and 11 describe the response of many: "He was in the world, and the

world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him." You might hear all this about Jesus Christ and say, "I don't know him and I'm not going to receive him." That's a scary thing to say to your Creator and your life and your light. It's something said because of our blindness and if that's your response this Christmas, hear these truths from John's gospel again and allow Jesus – the light – to take off the blinders that you might see him and know him.

You see, that's the second response. Verses 12 and 13 say, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." There will always be those who reject him out of blindness, but the Word became flesh, the Word shines as light in the darkness, so that we might see him for who he is and receive him as Saviour and King and receive the life and light he offers.

Christmas is the time when we remember that God sent his Son into the world to give new life to sinners and to restore us to fellowship with himself. Jesus comes to the spiritual caves where we've holed up in the dark, and as he stood at that cave in which Lazarus was buried, he cries out to us, "Come out!" Friends, judgement is coming one day, but before it comes Jesus cries, "Come out! Leave the darkness and come into the light. Receive me as your God and our substitute and your treasure. My death counts as your death and my righteousness counts as your righteousness, and through me you will have eternal life."

Heavenly Father, you have sent he who is life and light into the world to lead us out of our spiritual death and darkness. Open our eyes to his light, we pray, perhaps for some of us for the first time, that we might praise him as the angels and shepherds did on that night so long ago. And yet remind us, Father, that to truly praise him, we must fully entrust ourselves to him as the one who saves us from the consequences of our sins and as the King whom we faithfully serve. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and King. Amen.