



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for the Nativity of Our Lord

Hebrews 1:1-12 & St. John 1:1-14

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I've always been an early-riser, but especially so when I was a little boy. It paid off on Sunday mornings, because we weren't allowed to watch T.V. on Sunday mornings. I think my parents thought it was too "worldly" and that it would distract us from worship—and they were probably right! But when I was about ten, I'd sneak into the living room before anyone else was up and I could usually manage to watch two favourite shows before everyone else was up: Get Smart!, the show about the bumbling secret agent, and The Lone Ranger. When it came to the Lone Ranger, I always wondered why no one seemed to care who he was until the end of the story. He'd ride into town and save the day, everyone would be full of gratitude, but it was only as he was riding out of town that someone would think to ask, "Who was that masked man?" And then, of course, it was too late to ask.

Two weeks ago we were gathered here for a nativity play that centred on the birth of a baby. We saw Joseph and Mary sitting by the manger; we saw angels and shepherds and wise men come to adore him. Today we have a crèche in the corner and many of us probably have one setup at home—all centred on the baby. The baby, the Christ Child, came to save us, but who is he? Maybe we aren't even sure exactly what it means that he came to save. We sang a song a few minutes ago and asked, "What child is this?" That's the same question people were asking in the First Century and it was to answer that question that the gospels were written by Jesus friends and disciples. That's especially true of St. John, Jesus best friend, who took special care to tell people that the baby—that Jesus—wasn't just a man, but that he was God. That's the central truth of John's Gospel, but he sums it all up in his prologue—our Gospel lesson on this day when we remember and celebrate the coming of God Incarnate.

When it comes to the Lone Ranger, it's no big deal to be left wondering who the masked man was, but when it comes to the baby in the manger, it's absolutely critical that we know who he is, why he was born, and

what he came to do. This evening I want to look at what St. John tells us about Jesus so that we won't have to go away wondering, "What child is this?"

The first thing—the first *truth*—St. John tells us about Jesus is that he is the *Christ*. If we jump to the end of our Gospel lesson, he tells us in verse 17:

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

St. Matthew, in his gospel, tells us the story of how Jesus got his name:

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." (Matthew 1:20-21)

"Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua that literally means, "The LORD saves." What better name for the one whom St. John tells us is also "Christ"—another Greek word, but this time a title that means "the anointed one"—the same meaning as the Hebrew word "Messiah"—the title of the One whom God had promised as far back as the time of Adam and Eve's first sin, who would come to destroy sin and death and to restore sinful men and women to fellowship with God.

What child is this? St. John tells us that he is Jesus Christ—that he is Jesus the Saviour and the Christ—the promised and long-awaited Messiah. His human name, Jesus, tells us that he has come to save. His divinely given title, Christ, tells us what he's come to save us from: from the consequences of our sins.

If we go back to verse 1, St. John tells us a *second* truth about the child in the manger. John calls him the Word and he says:

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

These words have come under attack time and again because they are so precise in telling us who Jesus is. At the core of virtually every heresy, false doctrine, or cult is a misunderstanding of just what this verse tells us so precisely about the person of Jesus. In fact, as the Holy Spirit worked through John, he crafted these words so precisely that the Greek rules out the major heresies that were faced by the early Church.

In the face of those who claimed Jesus was just a man, these words affirm that he is eternal—that he existed before God began to create. In the face of those who denied the divinity of Jesus, these words affirm that he is God. And in the face of those who taught that the Trinity simply described God existing in three "modes" these words affirm that Jesus is not merely God, but has existed for all eternity *with* God—with the Father.

What child is this? This child is not only fully man, but is just as fully God. It's for this reason that he is worthy of our worship and why we need to confess with St. Thomas, "My Lord and my God."

St. John writes about Jesus as the "Word". Why the "Word"? That's the *third* truth here: Before he became Incarnate and took on human flesh, John says that he was called the "Word". Look again at verse 1:

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

That Jesus in his pre-incarnate state was known as the Word tells us something about God. He's not the *Deed*. He's not the *Thought*. He's not the *Feeling*. No, Jesus is the *Word*. As much as God's deed and thoughts and feelings are important, we need his *Word* if we are to be restored to him. The first two verses of our Epistle lesson from the book of Hebrews tells us:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

Our God has never intended to be unknown to us. He created humanity to know him and to be in fellowship with him, and when we fell into sin and broke that fellowship, he began communicating with us through his prophets, giving us the Scriptures, that the fellowship might be restored. Our God is a God who *speaks* to us, who tells us about himself. Not only that, but it is the power of the Word that brings life. Back at the beginning of this year I preached on the need for preaching that clearly communicates God's Word as we find it in the Bible. Why? Because his Word is the source of life. By the power of the Word he created the cosmos. By his Word written, we know God himself and we know his ways and expectations. And by his Word now Incarnate in Jesus, he offers us a means to be restored to the life we lost through sin. Jesus, the Word Incarnate, is the culmination of God's revelation to us. He is the last and final Word and the Word by which God

comes to us, makes himself clearly known to us, and draws us close.

I said that the Word was the agent of Creation. That's important. 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.

The fact that the world—that *we*—have failed to recognise him, to give him credit as our loving Creator, and to give him the worship and obedience that he is due stresses our condition: that we are sinful and rebellious creatures, blind to God and his truth, and lost in darkness. But John doesn't leave us lost in the dark. In verse 4 he gives us the Good News:

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 a problem: We're all sinners and therefore cut off from our holy God. We are spiritually dead and blind. John tells us that Jesus is the solution to both problems. He has the life we need and his life is the light 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 run through these five truths again. (1) The baby is Jesus Christ, the Saviour and promised Messiah. (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 your 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.