

Wesley Memorial Methodist Church

Bryant's Hill, St George, Bristol, BS5 8QS

10.45am Sunday 5 January 2025

Lectionary:

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Psalm 147:12-20

Ephesians 1:3-14

John 1:(1-9),10-18

Sermon

John's gospel opens with the passage known as the Prologue.

It sets out the theme and context of the whole gospel. For a long time the fourth gospel has been thought to be substantially later than the other gospels – usually because it shares themes in common with other groups around the time it was thought to be written, not least the gnostic Christians who were much more ‘mystical’ and used a lot of pictorial language. If you think of some of the key teachings in the gospel – “I am ... the Good Shepherd... the Vine... the Way the Truth and the Life... the Bread of Life” etc... It was more philosophical.

More recently it has been suggested by some scholars that John's gospel might actually have been the first to be written, and as such holds much of the earliest church teaching. This could make sense, that the disciples initially focussed on Jesus' teaching, but as time went on they realised there was a need to write the stories of his life. Hence Luke's gospel opening by referring to its purpose being to create “an orderly account of the events fulfilled among us”.

However you look at it, the prologue has at its climax the reality that at the heart of the gospel is the concept of the incarnation, of God becoming human in the person of Jesus, and its purpose, to make God known.

The opening “In the beginning...” is a deliberate reference back to the opening of the Hebrew Bible in Genesis. It starts with a reference to “the Word” which existed before all creation, and was itself part of God. This Word is the means through which all creation comes into being.

What is translated as ‘The Word’ in the prologue is ‘logos’ in Greek. It is more than just a ‘word’ or ‘expression’ it embodies the meaning and philosophy behind an ‘idea’. It is something of the ‘essence’ of existence.

So at the heart of the gospel of Jesus' mission is the very essence of the being of God – that has come into the world that they created (and without which the world could not have been created), for the explicit purpose of bringing their own people back to them.

John emphasises this by saying explicitly that this essence of God, became flesh (like one of us) and lived among us, in order that we could see the very glory of God. This being the primary purpose of Emmanuel – God With Us.

This then is the doctrine of what we call the Incarnation – the purpose of Christmas.

Some years back I was working with a sea scout unit from Norwich. I would help out primarily on their bigger camps and events – taking 150 young people for a fortnight away in the summer, 100 for a week on the Norfolk Broads at Easter, 30 or so for a week kayaking in the Wye Valley. The Scout leader in charge of the group asked me once why it was that the relationship I had with the young people was so much more intense than many of the other leaders had with them. He commented that, unlike many of the leaders who saw them weekly, I knew every child's name – but also could cite something specific/personal or less well known about each of them. He also wanted to know why it was that whenever they had free time, the children would choose to want to sit and talk with me, or play games – but always wanting me involved. He asked me what made me different from the other staff.

I explained that I could only answer in a 'theological' way.

For me the key thing was that in all my interaction with the young people they were helped to believe that I cared about them individually and personally – that nothing was too big or too small to talk about if they wanted to. That I wanted them to choose to relate to me, but that I would never take this for granted, or use my 'power' or 'authority' to make them do something they didn't want to. Although as an adult, a leader and an instructor, I had the power, I did not use it to coerce, rather to attract them.

I would become 'as if' a child among them – joining in with what was important to them, sharing their jokes, showing interest in what they cared about – yet at the same time I never denied my adulthood. I remained responsible for their physical and emotional safety. I could listen to anything they might want to tell me, but could not keep secrets, particularly if they were at risk. Most importantly, they knew I was genuine – I would never make a promise, unless I could 100% guarantee it, I would never lie to them – I would either decline to answer at all, or explain that there was a reason I could not tell them, including that I genuinely did not know. But they would know that there was nothing they could ever do that would stop me caring about them.

For me this is about being INCARNATIONAL.

As I became the 'adult-child', so God chose to become human, without ever denying their innate Godness.

A similar allusion would be to look at my relationship with my dogs. I love them, I care for them (feed them, ensure they are healthy, exercised, loved) and as far as I can tell they love me. But our communication and therefore our relationship is always limited by the gap between us. The only way that gap could ever be closed would be if by some miracle I could become a dog and live among them – we could romp and play and communicate as equals, even if I retained the knowledge and experience of being really a human in canine form.

But in all these illustrations – the most important part is the purpose.

If I became a dog it would not be for the joy of running in parks and rolling in revolting things, rather the purpose would be to enrich and reform the relationship between my dogs and myself – particularly when I returned to my human form.

In relating to the children in the scout group, the purpose was to build relationships that enabled them to grow and develop, to be supported and to achieve their potential.

This then is the purpose of the incarnation. God became one of us, to prove their love for us, and to inspire us to want to rebuild and retain our relationship with them in order that we will live as we were supposed to be, and get the best out of our lives.

New year is a time that many people make resolutions to live differently, usually to improve their lives.

You will know that former president of the USA Jimmy Carter died last Sunday aged 100. He once said;

“I have one life and one chance to make it count for something... my faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I am, whenever I can, for as long as I can with whatever I have, to try to make a difference”

He was a Southern Baptist, although he left than church over its treatment of women, but his words as I have quoted them are closer to John Wesley’s famous “Alls” where he encouraged Methodists to;

“Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.”

Before becoming President, Jimmy Carter was a Sunday School teacher, and spent all his life seeking to serve others, in the name of his faith.

The other tradition in the UK is to have the New Year Honours.

I was thrilled on New Year’s Eve, while working in our Yate Church to install new WiFi and Video Systems, to receive a WhatsApp message to tell me that Revd Andy Paget had been awarded the MBE in recognition of his work as Senior Chaplain to the Avon and Somerset Police. Important to me because Andy was my father’s direct successor in the role, but also because I have continued to work alongside Andy as a member of the Faith Communities Emergency Plan – a team of chaplains who can be sent to support those affected by major incidents across the force area.

Andy’s work has been to provide support and care for those who seek to serve and protect us, all too often at considerable personal cost – whether physically or mentally. In doing this he has represented the love of God to all - many whom would consider

themselves outside of the church, but who matter to God and are among those offered the promise of God in our gospel reading this morning.

Our challenge therefore is to take up the challenge of the last verse of our reading;

“No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known”

We must therefore make known the love of Jesus, the only Son, that through us others may come to know God also.

Amen