

The Word was God

John 1.1-14

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You come home after a trip of a few days outside the country; at the airport, strangely, no-one is waiting for you; you call your wife, but she does not pick up the mobile. Strange! So you take the train to go home. Is something wrong?

You have bought presents for the family, because it is almost Christmas; and you look forward to being warmly received by your wife and children, and of course to a shower, a good Christmas diner, and relaxation.

But when you put your key into the lock, it does not fit. The lock has been changed. Strange. So you ring the doorbell, but even though you hear music and voices of your wife and kids inside, no one opens the door.

You call, you shout, you bang the door, and slowly you realize – you are locked out, no longer welcome anymore.

This is not how it should be! But this is what happened to our Lord Jesus Christ when he came to his own people, to Israel, and to his own world, the world He himself created – He came to his own house, but his own have not received him.

1. Who is that stranger?

Who is Jesus, that stranger whose birthday we have celebrated this week? St John had been with Him for a few years, day-in day-out, and based on those experiences, he painted for us an image of our Lord in the opening chapter of his Gospel.

He does not make it easy for us; he uses theological terms that we are not familiar with. He speaks about the Word, that is in Greek, the Logos.

Greek philosophers spoke about the Logos as the divine mind from which all life had come, and that maintains order in the cosmos. The sun rises at a predictable time; the stars move regularly, seasons come and go in orderly manner. Why is there order, and not chaos?

The Greeks concluded: there is a Logos, a Word, a Reason, that rules the universe, just as there is reason in man. The universe has a soul.



In the Jewish Bible the Word is the speech of God that creates, it is dynamic, and it plays an almost independent role from God. God sends his Word, and then things happen, and these Words are sometimes described as if they have a personality of their own.

So when St. John used the term for this child that was born, for Jesus Christ, he did not do this in a vacuum. He was dialoguing with the philosophies of his own time.

And he deemed it convenient to use this very term, the Word, the power that organizes the universe, to explain who the little baby in the crib actually was.

In the beginning was the Word. John starts in the beginning. In the beginning? Who is able to comprehend the beginning of all things that exist?

But actually, John does not start just there. He says that at that very first moment in time, the Word already was. It existed already before the beginnings of time and matter.

This goes beyond my imagination. If the Word existed even before the beginning of all times, it is not part of creation, of time, of matter. It is eternal. He was God, is what the Gospel says.

But that Word was also with God, face to face with God. So it was not so immersed in God that it could not be distinguished. It was, as the theologians say: co-eternal with God.



When God speaks, his speech is divinely powerful and effective, and so filled with the Speaker, with God himself, that we have to wonder: is God's speech different from God?

Yes, sure, in as far as my speech is different from me. We are able to differentiate between the two.

But is God's speech then separate from God? No. Never. He is what He says, and what He says, is exactly who He is. The Word is with God, and it is God.

John's Gospel is full of language that underlines this deep basic unity between the Our Lord Jesus and God.

Maybe you say: but all this is so philosophical, what does this all matter to me... ?

Let me compare it with the great fantastic Christmas dinner you may have enjoyed. If you had dinner with friends, you may have asked your friend: 'Wow, that was great, what recipe did you use...' The food tasted so great, you just want to know how it was made.

The greatest thing of the Christmas dinner was of course not the recipe – it was the taste, the smell, the texture, the looks of the food, of course.

But you appreciate it even better by knowing what your host did to create it; it helps you understand why the taste was so great. And knowing the ingredients helps you to later also explain to others about that great diner. Without language to describe it, you are lost for words.

St John did not come to his theological recipes by studying Platonic Greek ideas; he did not come to his deep words about the Logos by studying Jewish theology. He actually came to these ideas from his very concrete meetings with Jesus. He tasted the real food that saved him and that sustained him.

St John writes in his first letter:

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

John wrote - not because he was fond of complicated theology but in order that you and I have community with the apostles and with one another... so that together we also embrace God the Son, Jesus Christ, as the way to God the Father.

In order to create that community, we need words, a testimony, and this is why St John wrote his Gospel and his letters.

He described the recipe of the Man He had come to know, Jesus, so that we would understand how great the diner is that he was offering.

The Greek philosophers, and Jewish theologians, could follow what John first wrote about the Logos; that it is in one way or another intertwined with God, that it is the Light of all man, that it is the Source of all Life.

But when John said that this Logos had become flesh; all their mental alarm-bells began to ring.

2. The Word has become flesh

John says that he has touched, and seen, and heard the Word, because the Word had become flesh. Flesh: that is a strong word, very physical. John leaves no doubt: The One who is God and who is with God became a real man. Tangible.

The Greeks knew many stories of the gods descending from Mount Olympus. In their mythology, gods often came to play on earth in human guise – like children having fun, often teasing people. But in the end of the day, they escaped, back to their Olympic heights again, when they ran into any trouble with humankind. They did not put up with the actual trials of man, but they were just playing games by their own rules.

Not so God. The Word became a real human being, not hidden behind the clouds of Mount Olympus, or behind the curtains of the Holy of Holies in the Jewish temple.

John says: He lived among us, and we have seen his glory.

Wrong, wrong wrong language for the Greeks and the Jews; they saw the glory of the gods, or of God, exactly in the fact that He was distant from man, and living in the sublime realms of the heavens that man can never be part of, because God is God and man is man.

But John has no hesitation; he had seen Jesus Christ, he had tasted the food, and this led him and his fellow followers of Jesus to the only possible conclusion:

This person is a real human being, but He is also divine. He has come from afar and He is just camping temporarily with us here on earth.

Camping indeed: When John says that he lived among us, he actually uses a Greek word that literally means: He pitched his tent among us.

For the Jews hearing that word, the connotation was clear: the same word was used in the Greek translation of their Old Testament for the tent of God. The tabernacle. John says that Jesus in his physicality, his humanness, was like the tabernacle of God.

The tabernacle, the tent, made a rather earthly impression on all who saw it, but it was also the place where God revealed his glory, where He revealed Himself.

God himself was present in the tent of Israel, but now God was present in the tent called Jesus of Nazareth.

How did John see the glory of God in Jesus Christ? How do we see the glory of God in Jesus?

In his miracles, his lifestyle, his words, his personality, his resurrection, He showed to us who God really is. And He can do this, because He comes from that world. He is the Word, with God, and God himself.

But it is not only in his magnificence that we see God's glory; it is also in his birth as a baby, his humanness, and his death that He shows us God.

St Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople around 400 AD, wrote in one of his homilies on the gospel of John:

We admire Him not only on account of His miracles but also by reason of the suffering. Even those very things, which seem to be shameful, He himself called that glory.

We see his glory even, and maybe especially so, in his incarnation that would lead straight to his death on the cross.

He is not like the Olympic gods, or the God of Islam, distant, detached from life, but He became like us, in order to take us back into the heart, into the embrace of the Father where He came from.



The Son of God became a man, so that the sons and daughters of man can become children of God...

He came down, to lift us up. He entered into our pit, to help us out.

3. The flesh has become divine

By this glorious deed of Jesus Christ, He forever changed our life.

But something also changed in regard to God.

Let me quote St Chrysostom again, in rather theological terms:

The word becomes flesh means that the second person of the Trinity assumes human nature, without giving up on being divine. ... It did not mean that the essence of the [divine] Word changes, but he adopted flesh to himself. His essence remained untouched.

[And] He [now] inhabits this tabernacle forever, for he clothed himself with our flesh, not as again to leave it, but always to have it with him.

Let me repeat this last sentence of the church father:

He clothed himself with our flesh, not as again to leave it, but always to have it with him.

When God accepted the human form, He did not give away his divinity, but He did forever adopt humanness into himself; Just as when we accept Jesus Christ, we do not lose our humanness, but God does make us participate in his divinity... thus making it possible for God and man to have communion.

His choice to descend has made it possible for us to participate in the glorious communion that exists between the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

How is this possible? St John says to us: We know God through the encounter with Jesus Christ.

We are his children if we receive Him, this great Christmas gift from God, by faith.

The Greek church fathers said: The Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit live together in an eternal dance.

And the Word adopted humanity - He became Jesus Christ - to draw us into that eternal dance of God. What an awesome thought.

Conclusion

When God came to this world, his own did not receive him. But us who have received him, he made us children of God.

When we have holy communion, let us in faith stretch our hands and heart to receive Him again, the great Christmas-gift of God. He came down to lift us up, back into the heart of God.

+ Amen