

Sermon: "In the Beginning"

Scripture: John 1:1-18

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."') 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 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.

John's passage is poetic, yet it can be hard to read out loud, and not much easier to preach or explain. Without trying to sound like a teacher let me try.

It was not long after Jesus' resurrection before the Christian Church was confronted with a very basic problem. It had begun in Judaism. In the beginning all its members had been Jews. By human descent Jesus was a Jew; and, to all intents and purposes, he was never outside Palestine. Christianity began among the Jews; and therefore, inevitably it spoke in the Jewish language and used Jewish categories of thought.

But although it was cradled in Judaism it very soon went out into the wider world. Within thirty years of Jesus' death, it had travelled all over Asia Minor and Greece and had arrived in Rome. By 60 AD there must have been 100,000 Greeks in the church for every Jew who was a Christian. Jewish ideas were completely strange to the Greeks.

The Greeks had never heard of the Messiah. The very center of Jewish expectation, the coming of the Messiah, was an idea that was quite alien to the Greeks. The very category in which the Jewish Christians conceived and presented Jesus meant nothing to them. Here then is the problem – how was Christianity to be presented to the Greek world?

Around the year 100 AD, there was a man in Ephesus who was fascinated by this problem. John lived in a Greek city. He dealt with Greeks to whom Jewish ideas were strange, unintelligible, and uncouth. How could he find a way to present Christianity to the Greeks that they would welcome and understand? In both Greek and Jewish thought, there existed the conception of "The Word". Here was something which belonged to the heritage of both races and that both could understand.

The Jewish background. To Jews, a word was far more than mere sound; it was something which had an independent existence and actually did things.

The Old Testament is full of that general idea of the power of words. Once Isaac had been deceived into blessing Jacob instead of Esau, nothing he could do could take that word blessing back again. The word had gone out and had begun to act, nothing could stop it.

The Greek Background. In 560 BC, a philosopher called Heraclitus had an idea that everything is in a state of flux. Everything was changing from day to day or even moment to moment. An example is it is impossible to step in the same river twice. You step into a river; step out; step back in again; but you do not step in the same river, for the water has flowed and it is a different river. But what gave to men and women reason and knowledge of the truth and the ability to judge between right and wrong was the word of God dwelling inside them. What keeps the stars in their courses? What makes the tides ebb and flow? What makes day and night come in unalterable order? All things are controlled by the word of God.

When the world had its beginning, the Word was already there; and the Word was with God; and the Word was God. This Word was in the beginning with God. (1-2)

Here at the beginning John says three things about Jesus: The Word was already there at the beginning of things. Going back to the first words in the Bible: "In the beginning when God created the Heavens and the earth ". John is saying the word is not one of the created things; the word was there before creation; the word is not part of the world which came into being in time; the word is part of eternity and was there with God before time and the world began. If the word was with God before time began, if God's word is part of the eternal scheme of things, it means that God was always like Jesus. Sometimes we tend to think of God as stern and avenging; and tend to think something Jesus did changed God's anger into love and altered his attitude to humans. But the entire New Testament tells us that God has always been like Jesus. What Jesus did was to open a window that we might see the eternal and unchanging love of God. It was only when Jesus came that we saw fully and completely what God has always been like.

"He was the agent through whom all things were made; and there is not a single thing which exist in this world which came into being without him." (v.3)

It may seem strange to us that John stresses the way in which the world was created; and that he connects Jesus with the work of creation. We believe that the Christ who re-creates the world was the co-worker of God when the world was first created, and that, in the act of redemption, God is seeking to win back that which was always his own.

In him was life and the life was the light of men. (v4)

The gospel of John begins and ends with life. At the very beginning, we read that in Jesus was life; and at the very end we read that John's aim in writing this gospel was that everyone might "believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (20:31). Quite simply, he means that life is the opposite of destruction, condemnation and death. "God sent his Son that everyone who believes should not perish but have eternal life" (3:16).

"Anyone who hears and believes has eternal life and will not come into judgement" (5:24).

John is quite sure that, although Jesus is the bringer of this life, the giver of life is God. Jesus can only give life to as many as God has given him. Clearly, whatever else eternal life is, it is not simply life that last forever. A life that lasts forever would be a terrible curse; often the thing for which many people long is release from life. In eternal life, there must be more than duration of life; there must be a certain quality of life. Eternal life is life which knows something of the serenity and power of the life of God himself. When Jesus came offering men and women eternal life, he was inviting them to enter into the very life of God.

Jesus is the light of all people. The function of John the Baptist was to point men and women to that light which was Christ. "I have come, said Jesus as light into the world" (12:46). The light Jesus brings is the light which puts chaos to flight. In the creation story, God moved upon the dark, formless chaos which was before the world began and said: "Let there be light" (Gen 1:3). The new created light of God routed the empty chaos into which it came. So, Jesus is the light which shines in the darkness (1:5).

He is the one person who can save life from becoming a chaos. Left to ourselves, we are at the mercy of our passions and our fears.

The light Jesus brings is a revealing light. It is their condemnation that people loved the darkness rather than the light; and they did so because their deeds were evil; and they hated the light lest their deeds should be exposed (3:19-20). The light that Jesus brings is something which shows things as they are. We never see ourselves until we see ourselves through the eyes of Jesus. We never see what our lives are like until we see them through the light of Jesus. Jesus often drives us to God by revealing us to ourselves.

The light which Jesus brings is a guiding light. One of the features of the gospel stories which no one can miss is the number of people who came running to Jesus asking; "What am I to do?" When Jesus comes into life, the path that was dark becomes light; the decision that was wrapped in the night of uncertainty is illuminated. Without Jesus, we are like people on an unknown road in the pitch dark. With Jesus the way is clear.

And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not put it out. (1:5)

"Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness" (8:12). Jesus says to his disciples that the light will be with them only for a short time; let them walk in it; if they do not, the darkness comes, and those who walk in darkness do not know where they are going. (12:35). John tells of Jesus walking on the water. He tells how the disciples had embarked on their boat and were crossing the lake without Jesus; then he says, "It was now dark and Jesus had not yet come to them" (6:17). John tells of the resurrection morning and of the hours before those who loved Jesus realized that he had risen from the dead; "While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came" (20:1). She was living at that moment in a world where she thought Jesus had been eliminated. John tells of the Last Supper, he tells how Judas received the piece of bread and then went out to arrange the betrayal of Jesus; After receiving the bread he went out "And it was night" (13:30)

There emerged a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness, in order to bear witness to the light, that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; his function was to bear witness to the light. (1:6-8)

John the Baptist came for testimony to bear witness to the light. John the Baptist bore witness that he saw the spirit descending upon Jesus.

He was the real light, who, in his coming into the world, gives light to every man. (1:9)

So what John is saying is that Jesus is the real light that has come to bring enlightenment. Before Jesus came, there were other lights which people followed. Some were flickers of truth, some were faint glimpses of reality, some led people out into the dark and left them there. There are still some partial lights, false lights, and some people still follow them. Jesus is the only genuine light to guide us on our way.

A traveler tells how once in Italy he was standing on a hill overlooking the Bay of Naples. It was so dark that nothing could be seen; then all of the sudden there came a lightning flash and everything, in every detail, was lit up. When Jesus came, he came like a light in the dark.

Jesus' coming dissipated the shadows of doubt. Until he came, it was possible only to guess about God. God dwelt either in the shadows that no one could penetrate or in the light that no one can approach, but when Jesus came people saw what God was like. Jesus is the light who lights everyone who comes into the world. Only the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has a heart big enough to hold all the world. *He was in the world, and, although the world came into being through him, the world did not recognize him. It was into his own home that he came, and his own people did not welcome him. (1:10-11)*

When we look at the world, we see an amazing order. The planets keep to their appointed courses. The tides observe their appointed times. Summer, winter, day, night come in appointed order. Clearly there must be a mind behind it all. Where did we get our power to think, reason, to know? Where do we get our knowledge of right and wrong?

Although the actions of the word were there for all to see, he went unrecognized. In the end, God's creating and directing word did come into this world in the form of the man Jesus. Jesus came to a land which was God's land, Palestine, and to people who were God's people, Jews. He should have been coming to a nation that would welcome him with open arms, but he was rejected. He was received with hate and not with adoration.

To all those who did receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God. These were born not of blood, nor human impulse, nor of any man's will, but their birth was of God. (1:12-13)

Not everyone rejected Jesus when he came; there were some who did receive him and welcome him; and to them Jesus gave the right to become children of God. We cannot make ourselves children of God; we must enter a relationship which God offers us. We can never enter into friendship with God by our own will and power; we can only enter into a friendship with God when God himself opens the way. We accept it through believing in the name of Jesus Christ.

It is what Jesus is that opens us to the possibilities of becoming the children of God.

So, the Word of God became a person, and took up his abode in our being, full of grace and truth; and we looked with our own eyes upon his glory, glory like the glory which an only son receives from a father. (1:14)

John has thought and talked about the word of God, that powerful, creative, dynamic word, which was the agent of creation, that guiding directing, controlling word which puts order into the universe and intelligence into human beings. These were familiar to both Jew and Greek. This word has become a person, and with our own eyes we saw him. John declares that the word actually came to earth in the form of a man and was seen by human eyes. That God could and would become a human person, that God could enter into this life that we live, that eternity could appear in time, that somehow the Creator could appear in creation in such a way that he could actually be seen. In Jesus we see God living life as he would have lived it if he had been a man.

Grace always has the idea of something completely undeserved. It always has the idea of something that we could never have earned or achieved for ourselves. The fact that God came to earth to live and to die for men and women is not something which humanity deserved; it is an act of pure love on the part of God.

Jesus is the embodiment of the truth, "I am the truth" (14:6), to see the truth, we must look at Jesus.

Jesus was the communicator of truth. He told the disciples that if they continued with him, they would know the truth (8:31) He told Pilate that his object in coming into this world was to witness to the truth (8:37). He seeks not his own glory but the glory of him who sent him (7:18). It is his father who glorifies him. The glory that was on Jesus, that clung about him, that shone through him, that acted in him is the glory of God.

John was his witness, and his statement still sounds out; 'This is he of whom I said to you, he who comes after me has been advanced before me, because he was before me. On his fullness we all of us have drawn, and from him we have received grace upon grace, for it was the law which was given by Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (1:15-17)

In Christ, we find grace. The different ages and different situations in life demand different kinds of grace. We need one grace in the days of prosperity and another in the days of adversity, we need one grace in the sunlit days of youth and another when the shadows of age begin to lengthen. The church

needs one grace in the age of persecution and another when the days of acceptance have come. We need one grace when we feel that we are on top of things and another when we are depressed and discouraged and near despair. We need one grace to bear our own burdens and another to bear another's burdens. We need one grace when we are sure of things and another when there seems nothing certain left in the world. The grace of God is never static but always a dynamic thing.

The law was given by Moses. People had to do a thing whether they liked it or not, and whether they knew the reason or not; but with Jesus, we seek to answer the love of God like sons and daughters.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, the Gospel according to John tells us, "The word became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth." Christmas proclaims that God has come in flesh, has come "To save us all from Satan's power." Christmas celebrates more than a birthday; Christmas acclaims the advent of messianic salvation. Christ was sent among us in order to save us. John says; "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose." AMEN.

Benediction:

John meant that in Jesus there dwelt the totality of the wisdom, the power and the love of God. We can go to Jesus with any need and find that need supplied. We can go to Jesus with any ideal and find that ideal realized. The person who is in love with beauty will find the supreme beauty. The person to whom life is the search for knowledge will find supreme revelation. In Jesus, the person who needs courage will find the secret of being brave. In Jesus, the person who is conscious of sin will find the forgiveness for that sin and the strength to do good. **Peace be with you.**