

A Revealing God

Isaiah 52:7-10 | Hebrews 1:1-12 | Psalm 98 | John 1:1-14

JOHN 1:1-14

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.*

INTRODUCTION

As many of you know, I will often begin a sermon with a quote or a bit of literature, something to draw us into the emotional frequency of the text we will explore. But honestly, that's an impossible thing to do with the Gospel reading we just heard, the prologue to John. I cannot add anything of artistic value that would not diminish the grandeur and beauty of these verses, these profound theological statements, presented in intangibly philosophical ways—while not strictly poetry in the Greek or Hebraic sense—nevertheless adorned with rich poetic expression.

These qualities also make these verses complex, and perhaps a bit unexpected. Like we heard in the opening of Mark's Gospel a few weeks ago, the traditional Christmas story is completely absent: no Mary and no Joseph, no shepherds and no wise men, no sheep and no donkeys, no inn, no manger, and no baby Jesus. Mark starts with the adult Jesus at the dawning of his ministry. But here in John's Gospel, we go the other direction chronologically, all the way back to before the beginning of Creation. Why? This is a question that has vexed me for as long as I have been an Anglican. Why did Cranmer choose that the reading for Christmas Day, every single year, should be these verses in John 1? Why is it important that we start before there was time? Why do we trade the adorable narrative and all its potential for sentimentality for this beautiful, difficult, complicated, abstract collision of theological ideas? Well, I think it is because John's focus in this prologue is one of the most fundamental claims of the Christian faith: *In the Incarnation, God has chosen, at great cost, to reveal himself.* That is our lesson for today and we do well to pay attention: *In the Incarnation, God has chosen, at great cost, to reveal himself.* Let's take a closer look.

1. THE REVELATION OF GOD

First, let's consider what it means for God to reveal himself. John begins, in the first nine verses, with a statement that evokes Genesis. "*In the beginning...*" is followed by other ideas from Genesis 1: God speaking, Creation, and references to light and life.¹ This is not an accident, but it is framed in a particular way. It is framed to remind the reader of the first time God expressed

¹ Gen 1:1-5.

himself in history, the first words spoken by the Creator back at the very beginning of the Scriptures. But here, the Evangelist moves us into the conceptual realm, not the merely physical.

Stay with me for a moment. This opening phrase—*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”*²—is, as such, an important one.² It is a description of, secondly, the Incarnation—that is, the embodiment or taking on a body of the pre-existent God. This phrase is also a widely and egregiously misused one. People will often turn it into some kind of mystical reference to a metaphysical being that ends up meaning whatever they want it to mean.³ If we just keep reading, I think it becomes clear. This is not a metaphysical use of the idea of *word*, but a metaphorical one. Like the concept of light in the following verses, it is there to show us something specific: that God is revealing himself. It is not saying that this person, who we find out later is Jesus, God’s Son—it is not saying that this person is the Word in whatever way we determine, but rather just as God revealed himself by speaking into Creation, God now reveals himself through his Son. The appearance of this Incarnated one, this divine-and-human person, is God’s self-revelation, both visibly and audibly.

2. THE REJECTION OR RESCUE OF GOD

And as we see in the following verses, thirdly, there are simply two responses to this revelation. The first is found in verses 10-11, where John tells us that the humanity rejected him. Listen again: *“He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”*⁴ Think about that for a moment. Here is God, *the* God, God the Creator of all that exists, God who is eternal, who existed before history, and yet who chose to enter into history in the form of a human, God the Son. And humanity has the gall, the audacity—as the Yiddish would say, the *chutzpah*—to reject him. It’s sheer lunacy from our perspective. God has revealed himself, and we have turned a deaf ear. But I think there is even more buried in the meaning there. By the end of this Gospel reading, we come to learn that humanity did not just ignore God the Son, Jesus the Christ, but we actually put him to death. From his perspective, there is a great cost to his Incarnation.

But why? Why would we have done this? Why do we reject God? The truth is, we don’t like the idea of somebody other than us being the gods of our lives. If we realise that God has revealed himself, that God has entered into our world and our lives and has something to say, we no longer get the excuse of strategic ignorance. We must, rather, come to terms with not being in charge at the most fundamental level, with giving up some amount of our self-determination and living according to the Word of this God, the ways he has set forth for us. It’s a difficult thing to encounter God, to accept him, to know him, to believe in him. And yet, his revelation demands it of us because he is the light in our dark world. And make no mistake, it is a dark world. As Patrick reminded us last night, one need not look very far into the news to understand that: from terrorist plots in Vienna to terrorist realities in the Middle East, the tragedy of shootings in Prague or the ongoing wars all around the world. Seeing the Incarnation as the

² John 1:1.

³ And with good reason: The word here, *logos* (λόγος), is a versatile word in Greek philosophy: meaning a building block of reason, knowledge, and rational arguments or even a mode of persuasion. It was an important, well known, and abstract concept in the first century.

⁴ John 1:10-11.

light in the dark, the voice of God in the silence, means taking some responsibility. There are dire consequences for rejecting God Incarnate.

The second response, the other choice, is captured in the last three verses. *“But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 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.”*⁵ God has revealed himself, and so he compels us to believe. And in believing, we become children of God, adopted brothers and sisters to God the Son, those who experience the glory of God.⁶ What a privilege it is. Christ Jesus, the revelation of God in human form, came and lived among us, indeed he died for us, ransoming us, meeting the righteous requirement of God for our sin on our behalf, so that we might be made his people, that we might become the children of God. Because God not only creates the land, the sea, and all that in them is by his word, including us, but saves us by his Word.⁷ How do we make this choice? By believing. By receiving this revelation.

CONCLUSION

As I begin to close, I won’t labour the point. On this Christmas Day, I hope you enjoy all the happiness and delight of such a holiday. I hope you eat well, receive wonderful gifts, relish in the company of loved ones, and generally find your way to contentment, or at least some good cheer. But in the quiet moments, perhaps as you find yourself thinking deeply, or enjoying a conversation with a dear friend, or in the peaceful calm before sleeping, let your mind consider the profound, the abstract, the deeply meaningful thing that we celebrate today. Recall this most fundamental truth: *In the Incarnation, God has chosen, at great cost, to reveal himself.* And let yourself believe, perhaps coming to faith for the first time, or deepening an already present faith. May this mystery of the Incarnation—this understanding that God chose to reveal himself so that he might save us and make us his people—may it encourage you this day. Happy Christmas.

Let’s pray. *Heavenly Father, we thank you for setting aside eternity and entering history that you might save us from the darkness of this world. Help us to believe and so to see your glory. We pray this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

⁵ John 1:12-14.

⁶ See Gal 4:5, Rom 8:15, and Eph 1:5.

⁷ See Ps 107:20.