

“The Word Made Flesh”

Sunday 13th June 2010

Karen Senior

Readings:

Philippians 2: 5 - 8

Psalm 2

John 1: 1 - 18

Ask a child to describe God, and often the answer will be one that makes us adults smile - like the three year old who said “God is very big, but not as big as my Daddy”

Adults' views of what God is like....are often not much more specific ... and I wonder, if someone at the bus stop were to ask you “do you believe in God?” and then “What do you think he's like then?” what would you say? ... Apart from “O look here comes the 277”!

Down the ages, artists have tried to represent God ... and any classical art gallery will display paintings of how artists imagine biblical scenes might have looked. In a much less classic representation from our own time God features quite frequently in Springfield where the Simpson family live ... and though his face is never shown, we quite frequently see his robe and his sandals and his big white beard. It's a common caricature – and so is the Star Wars-like powerful force image of God, which is common in our culture.

But if you were here last week you will remember we were thinking about God's greatness, his power, and the way he revealed himself to Moses in a bush which was on fire but didn't burn up: a mysterious and awesome God, who was prepared to have a personal conversation with an elderly nomad shepherd who had a criminal record. We thought about him as the God of history, the God who cares, and the God who acts, but who is beyond description and explanation.

If we go back to the bus stop, if *you* took the initiative and asked the others waiting what they thought about God, chances are that before too long you'd hear that classic line - “Well, of course I'm not really religious myself, but all religions are the same really aren't they? After all, they are all worshipping the same God.”

Actually I don't think you need to have a GCSE in Religious Studies to be able to confidently say the Hindu gods are seen in a very different way to the God of the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. I'm not meaning that to be in any way a slight on Hindu people – because I think they would agree that their many gods are portrayed as very different to the one God we proclaim.

Those 3 world faiths. Judaism, Christianity and Islam do have things in

common: Abraham for example – as he features in all their Holy books, and they would all say that God is Holy and Awesome and deserving our praise and worship.

The amazing thing which makes Christianity different from all other major religions is the event which we try to celebrate every year ... but try as we might it so easily gets buried by tinsel and wrapping paper, or coughed aside by the inevitable flu's and coughs which are doing the rounds and taking advantage of us all being tired and stressed at the darkest point in the year.

The amazing thing which is that the God we worship, loves his people so much that he was prepared to become human himself, to show us what he is really like, in a form which we can relate to.

The beginning of John's Gospel isn't something we're used to hearing in church on a Sunny June morning ... those of us who recognise it expect it to be read at night with the candles twinkling, either at the Carol service or midnight Communion. And when it is read well – like it just has been – it is a spine tingling reading which is all too easy to listen to and enjoy and yet still not really quite grasp what it is telling us.

And it's not the easiest of Bible passages to grasp at a first hearing ... If you are the sort of person who listens to sermons without opening the Church Bible, it might be helpful to open it just now and look at the reading again – on p.1063

Who is it talking about? ... God? ... Jesus? The Word – who is the Word? Does it take us back to what Ray was saying 2 weeks ago when he had the challenge of preaching on the Trinity, the fact that we worship a God who is the one God, and yet is three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God”

“In the beginning” is the way that the first book of the Old Testament begins – the Genesis account of the creation, and John must have chosen the same words deliberately to underline that very point. For John it wasn't “The Old Testament” if course – it was his Bible, his Jewish Scripture ... and he wasn't to know that there would one day also be a New Testament, and that his writings would be included in it.

“The Word” here, is Jesus – and John claims very clearly that Jesus was there at the start of time - “He was with God in the beginning”. He didn't come into existence when the Angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was going to have a baby ... that was the point at which he became human.

Luke's Gospel – another bit we usually read at carol services – says that the angel told Mary “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you, So the Holy one to be born will be called the

Son of God"

In our other reading this morning, Paul put it like this to the Christians in Philippi - Jesus Christ.... "being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness ..." which is what the hymn we began with this morning is based on:

"From heaven you came, helpless babe,
entered our world your glory veiled,
not to be served but to serve and give your life that we might live....
This is our God the Servant King...."

But going back to John 1 in the Bible; not only was he with God but "through him all things were made, without him nothing was made that has been made" Hence that awesome line in the first hymn Hands that flung stars into space to cruel nails surrendered.

"The Word" might seem to us an odd way of referring to Jesus, but it would have had immediate meaning to the first people who read John's Gospel.

Jewish readers would recognise "The Word" from their scriptures - our Old Testament, where the Word of God was seen as God powerfully at work:

"By the Word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the
breath of his mouth", (Psalm 33 v6)

He sent forth his word and healed them,
He rescued them from the grave. (Psalm 107 v20)

And Jewish Readers would recognise "The Word of the Lord" as given to and proclaimed by the prophets:

"The Word of the Lord came to Isaiah" (Isaiah 38 v4)

And read any of the prophets and the phrase "The word of the Lord" is frequently used.

Greek Readers of John's Gospel would have a different understanding of what "The Word" meant - in Greek philosophical thinking, logos, which is Greek for word, was all about the shaping and ordering of the universe, but quite distinct from the material world.

For Jews and Greeks alike, the idea of the word becoming flesh was a shocking one.

The Jewish Shema prayer, which is prayed daily, begins with the words:

"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one...."

So for John to be claiming that Jesus, the man he knew and followed was GOD, was blasphemous.

The Greeks on the other hand found the idea of the Word, the Logos, becoming flesh just about unthinkable because to them the flesh, the body, was the unpleasant part of our humanity which holds the soul, which as they saw it was the only worthy bit.

But to John – “The Word became flesh” was the essence of the good news he was proclaiming ... that he would come back to again and again in this book.

If the idea of God becoming a human being was one which those early readers could accept, at all, the chances are that they would have seen God as the epitome of human power – God as a king – or as an equal of the Roman Emperor.

Yet the indescribable God who met with Moses in the burning bush, chose to become human in the womb of an ordinary, unremarkable young woman – almost certainly still a teenager, engaged to be married to a working man, who lived under the Roman occupation of Palestine in the reign of Caesar Augustus, when Quirinius was Governor of Syria. God was born when his mother was away from home, and the only place she had to put him was an animal trough.

He spent his early childhood as a refugee, and then his family settled in a ‘blink-and-you-miss-it’ kind of hamlet, where some of the people lived in caves, Nazareth in the Galilee region of the Roman Empire.

He almost certainly worked with his step father, as a carpenter & general handyman and the chances are that work on the new state of the art Roman town of Sepphoris, a few miles from Nazareth, provided the income to put bread on the table ... though it did come from the Occupying forces - unpopular occupying forces who were brutal and unjust and hated by the Jews.

Jesus didn't write a book, he didn't marry or have children, he didn't live a long life, and he died a horrible, violent early death. Not surprising perhaps that people then, and people now, find it hard to believe that he was the Son of God, the Word made flesh. It wasn't the script we would have written, but John writes ... He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him.

But it was exactly the life that Jesus was expecting in Paul's words again ... “he made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness., and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.”

And when he died on that cross, which is what we are remembering in this Communion service, he forgave the people who had crucified him - the Roman

soldiers who were just doing their job, and the Jewish religious elite who had set him up because they were furious at the rumours that he was claiming, or even not denying claims, to be the Son of God – the word made flesh.

In the way that he lived and in the way that he died, Jesus showed us who God is and how God reacts.

Jesus, the word made flesh, knew what it was to be tired, and too have the demands of too many people upon him. He knew what it was like to be hungry and thirsty and too hot under the Middle Eastern sun. He knew the pleasures of eating with friends, and the pain of friends misunderstanding him. He knew the grief of a friend dying, and he always reached out to the sick and the poor and the socially unacceptable people.

“No-one has ever seen God,” it says in our church bibles, “but God the one and only, who is at the father's side has made him known” Many translations of the Bible translate that line as “No-one has ever seen God, but God the one and only **Son**, who is at the father's side has made him known”

None of us have ever seen God, but Jesus came to our world and called people like John to follow him. He gave up the privileges of being God, to live a human life and die a human death. He still calls us to follow him, and we know that sometimes we do that eagerly and sometimes it is a struggle, and we get distracted and disinterested, and we lose sight of him.

As the music group sing for us now – you are welcome to join in if you want to, but you might just want to ponder this amazing reality which John wrote his book to communicate, that Jesus Christ took on human nature and lived a human life in order that he could show us what God was like, and in order to give himself up to death, even death on the cross, because he loves us.