

MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 27 December 2009, Kilcalmonell, linked with Killean and Kilchenzie

1st Sunday after Christmas

preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff

hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)

Welcome & Intimations

Opening Hymn : 'Spirit of truth and grace' (CH 608)

Children's Talk

Children's Hymn : 'Spirit of God, unseen as the wind' (CH 600)

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

God who gives life to the world,
we thank you for all the good we receive:
time together with family and friends,
presents under the Christmas tree,
food we will remember for time to come.
May these simple things
remind us that you are the Giver, O God,
and that we should be thankful.

God we pray
for those who did not have a good time,
for all the many reasons that can be;
we pray for those we do not have food at all;
we pray for those whose gifts
only existed in their imagination.

And now as Jesus taught us, we pray:
Our Father...
...Amen.

Readings : Isaiah 61:10-62:3 & John 1:1-18 (*New Revised Standard Version*, with corrections for John 1 – below, in italics)

¹ *From* the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

² *It* was in the beginning with God.

³ All things came into being through *it*,
and without *it* not one thing came into being.

What has come into being ⁴ in *it* 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,
he gave power to become children of God,
those who believed in his name,
13 who were not *born* of blood
nor of the will of the flesh
nor of the will of a 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 *indeed*
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 *the only son*,¹
who is close to the father's heart,
who has made him known.

Hymn : 'In the beginning was the Word'²

1. In the beginning was the Word,
his voice around the earth was heard;
he speaks to all the human race;
when he was born he had no place.
2. When he was born he had no place,
but he brought light to fill our space;
whom sun and moon their brilliance gave,
he, as the Lord, became a slave.
3. He, as the Lord, became a slave,
carries our burden to his grave;
he lives among all evil deeds,
his glory with our frailty meets.
4. His glory with our frailty meets,
uplifts and heals our human needs;
he came in deep and darkest night,
creating us life-giving light.
5. Creating us life-giving light
he brings us God within our sight;
God calls us until he is heard,
in the beginning was the Word.

Sermon

David Coleman, a URC minister in Brighton and a friend of ours, made a lovely video for Christmas,³ telling the Christmas stories of Matthew and of Luke. In the video the children kept asking, 'Is that all, Matthew?' and 'Is that all, Luke?' Every time again another part of the stories was added. But at the end the children still asked, 'Is that

¹ This is an issue of textual criticism. Several recent translations, but not all, follow the reading of the New Testament standard text in NestleAland²⁷, which says something like 'the only (begotten) God', instead of 'the only (begotten) son'. The latter option can be found in older translations, such as the *King James Version*, and also in the Latin Bible, the *Vulgate*, as well as in even older Latin, Syrian and Greek translations. Among the Greek witnesses for both readings there is certainly no unanimity, and I tend to choose in favour of the ancient translations and their Greek witnesses, because that seems to make more sense, especially if we want to value the Jewish roots of Christian faith, according to which it is unthinkable to speak of God in terms of birth – that would rather be Hellenistic paganism.

² A translation of 'In den beginne was het woord', a hymn by Tom Naastepad, which can be found in the Dutch protestant hymn book, *Liedboek voor de kerken* (Den Haag: Boekencentrum, 1973) Gezang 150. Tune: Old 100th, CH 63; or alternatively: Tallis's canon, CH 808.

³ Can be viewed on [YouTube](#).

all?’ And then the answer was, ‘No, that’s not all. Now it is up to you to tell the story to other people.’

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We know that Matthew was probably the first to write down a story about Jesus’ birth, followed by Luke shortly after, and both wrote in the years after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in 70 AD – a truly traumatic time for the synagogue and the church. Mark, who wrote his gospel some years before that, does not have any story for Christmas. John was the last to write, probably around 100 AD, and he does not have a story about Jesus’ birth, but a theological reflection on his origin.

Matthew was talking to a church that had many members coming from Jewish origin. In addition to that Luke addressed a church that also had many members coming in from a pagan Hellenistic world. Matthew and Luke clearly tell different stories. John seems to try to reconcile the Jewish faith of Jesus with the Hellenistic religion and philosophy. It is important that we value each of these three different approaches on their own merits. The Gospel is not about Jesus’ history, but about His Story.

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David’s kids kept asking, ‘Is that all?’ And the answer was, ‘No, now *you* have got to tell the story.’ That is exactly what people have been doing throughout the centuries. They have constantly added other stories and merged the Bible stories into that. Just have a closer look at your Christmas cards.

On Christmas cards there will be many an ox and a donkey, which do not appear in the Gospel. Looking for a biblical origin of these, we find that they are a rather unfriendly addition.⁴ The three ‘kings’ are actually a theologically more correct make-over of three ‘wizards’.⁵ Instead of a stable we can find a cave, which refers to old Christian legends.⁶ In medieval pictures we often see Mary and Joseph sitting in a beautiful house – and indeed Matthew mentions a ‘house’, not a stable. Many Victorian pictures and carols include lots of snow, which is very unlikely in Bethlehem. And those who have scrutinised the timing of Jesus’ birth, conclude that it should have been some time in March, not in December.

Is this wrong? Should we strip all these additions and return to the original story? Well, to which original story? Because Matthew’s and Luke’s stories are not simply compatible. I think being critical is a good virtue, but the criterion should be if additions

⁴ The donkey may refer to Gen. 49:14 – *Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens* (King James Version, which is closer to the old Latin Bible text) – and the ox may refer to Prov. 15:17 – *better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it*. But together, also including the manger (‘crib’), they are found in Isa. 1:3 – *the ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s manger; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand*.

⁵ Greek *magoi* = magicians.

⁶ And also to a non-Christian and clearly anti-Christian story in which a Roman soldier, Pantera, is the actual father of Jesus.

help us to better understand the message of Christmas. That message does need facts, but itself it is beyond facts.

Every particular time in history, and each culture, will need its own stories and images to convey the message of Christmas. It is not helpful to condemn others for their particular imagination, but we do not have to accept everything either. For example, I quite like the whole thing about dark winter nights and snow. Nothing to do with Bethlehem AD 1, notoriously un-biblical, yes, but it very well expresses our darkness being enlightened by Christ, and it creates an atmosphere of wonderment around the Bible stories. So, although it's not correct, it does help me to discover the truth in the story.

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John does not bother at all about the facts of Jesus' birth. He may have thought that Matthew and Luke already had done the part of explaining Jesus' origin by telling a wondrous story around his birth. Instead John chooses a totally different approach.

John uses biblical language and elements from Jewish thinking in the 1st century,⁷ and he connects that to concepts that were familiar to those who came from a Hellenistic background, thoroughly permeated with Greek philosophy. *From the beginning was the Word* was a line that could immediately be understood by Jews and Greek. It is about creation as Genesis tells us – *from the beginning* – and it is about the *logos*, Greek for 'word', which was well-known by anyone with some notion of Hellenistic culture.

But what then is the message John is trying to get across to us?

Now that is the subject of many thorough studies, many of which I have never read. But although academic study certainly is important to understand the Bible, it is ultimately about the meaning that each of us can render to the words. Faith is not based on analysis, but on, well, on faith. So trying to find out what John is telling us, I can only speak from what I believe – and any extra knowledge I may have is rather additional.

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John wants to make clear that Jesus' origin is with God. But he wants to make it equally clear that Jesus is not a deity walking on earth. Especially the second part is very important for us.

In the church we are accustomed to speak of Jesus as son of God. And in the story of Luke the angels do use these words. Yet, there has always, from the very beginning of

⁷ Notably the *logos* philosophy from the Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria. In line with the Platonic schools of philosophy, such as the Stoics, Philo used the term *logos* to mean the creative principle. *Logos* was the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *dabar* – meaning 'word', 'deed' – which is central to God's work in general and the story of Genesis 1-2 in particular.

the church until today, been another stream of thinking which put, in various ways, the main emphasis on Jesus' humanity. The debate about how these two, the divine and the human, would relate has been one of the church's most formative exercises.

I think in our days, in which we are in the middle of a major cultural shift,⁸ we need to find a new position again. However, it is not a matter of finding out how much emphasis to put on either divinity or humanity. We have to thoroughly rethink what divinity and humanity actually mean. And John's opening chapter could be very helpful.

Often it is said that John tells us how God was born in human form. I really do not think that is true. John makes clear distinctions and chooses his words with great care.

*From the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.*

The *Word* came down, not God, even if the Word was the maximum reflection of God as humans could possibly perceive. The distinction is more important than the resemblance.

If it would be about God becoming human, Jesus would not be much different from any pagan Greek hero, the likes of Heracles or Achilles. Reading the wondrous stories about Jesus' birth, especially the ones Luke tells, people could have been led to think so. John wants to be very clear: this is not the case. Jesus is not like the half-divine, half-human heroes of Greek mythology. Nor is he like a supernatural superman, as later Christian tradition often has made of him.

For the Bible it is essential to remember the fundamental difference between God and humans. God can never ever fit into anything created. *God above, man below*⁹ – that is how things are. But all we need to be concerned about is this earth, since anything 'above' is outwith our reach and understanding.

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But then, what does it mean to call Jesus a son of God? Or what would make the difference between Jesus and us?

God does not fit into anything created, but yet God is present in all creatures and in all created things. Especially in human beings who, according to Genesis, from the beginning reflect God's image. That spark of light from God planted in our souls is not any capacity or skill or virtue. No, says John, that light from God is... a word. All we have from God is his Word.

Again, that is not something you can simply pin down. The Bible, for example, *contains* the Word of God, but it does not equal it. If it would, God's Word would be bound and

⁸ Very briefly: from modernism to post-modernism.

⁹ From the chorus line in Sydney Carter's Christmas carol 'Every star shall sing a carol'.

limited. But by definition God is always greater and the Word always continues its journey. As the hymn said, *God calls us until he is heard*.

Still that Word of God is all we have. And that is where Jesus enters our lives. Jesus is, says John, the *Word-become-flesh*. In Jesus' words and deeds, through his whole being, God's Word came true, touched people around him, and still today moves billions of people.

Jesus was human like us. He was born, he loved life, he wept, he was very angry, he taught, he healed, he cursed, and finally he died. But the Word that formed his life, made him alive again. By being fully human Jesus revealed that spark of God's light we all have received in such a way that his life became the living Word of God. All he said and did reflected God's presence. Not by adding something supernatural, but by making his humanity superbly natural – as in the beginning. And we are to follow in Jesus' footsteps.

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John carefully preserves the distinction between God above and humankind below, but the Word, which is the best possible reflection of God's being, is always present among us. Professor Schillebeeckx,¹⁰ who died last week and who was one of the great renewers of the Roman Catholic church in The Netherlands, famously said, "in your own footprints you will discern the imprint of God's love".

The message of Christmas is not to bring supernatural mystery into our world, but to listen to God's Word and to follow Jesus who himself became God's living Word.

Now, how to do that, is not simple. It means following Jesus; it requires to find and spread that light of God which is within ourselves. John tells his stories about that. Stories about water turning into wine, people being reborn, five loafs of bread feeding thousands of people, and ultimately dead people being alive.

In our material world we need to look for the things that are greater than life. The visions that go beyond the facts. The miracles that overturn our common experience. It is all about this earth, but once God's Word, in and through Jesus, has touched us, this world is no longer this world.

Is that all, John? No, now it is your turn to hear the Word, live it and pass it on to others. *From the beginning is the Word*, and we need to keep it going.

Amen.

¹⁰ Edward Schillebeeckx (1914-2009) was a Belgian Dominican priest, who taught dogmatics at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands. Recommended reading, for those who do not stumble and fall on reading sophisticated theology, are *Jesus: An Experiment In Christology* (London: Collins, 1979) and *Church: The Human Story Of God* (London: SCM, 1990). More information on the Stichting Edward Schillebeeckx [website](#).

Hymn : 'O little Love' (CH 329)

Offering and Dedication

Announcement

Prayer of Intercession

God above,
who grants us your Word,
who gave us our brother Jesus,
we pray for this world.

We pray that your light may be noticed,
in houses, schools and work places,
in pubs, theatres and stadiums,
in the poor and the wealthy,
in the illiterate and the learned.
We pray that we may watch our footsteps
so we will see your love imprinted.

We pray for the light of Christmas
to shine in our darkness.
The darkness of despair and grief,
the darkness of misunderstanding,
the darkness of poverty and exploitation.
Let your light shine, O God,
for us and through us.

In silence we remember those
we know need us
to remember them.
(*silence*)

So we pray,
through Jesus Christ,
God's living Word.
Amen.

Closing Hymn : 'Now, Lord, according to thy word' (CH 333)

Blessing