

The Word became flesh

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I wonder this Christmas what your favourite TV ad has been. Companies, brands, shops have adverts at Christmas every year, we know, and I wonder what your favourite one has been.

And they vary, don't they, from the heartwarming through to the bizarre, from the clever through to the confusing. But I wonder if you've noticed this year that in the Christmas adverts that companies produce, one thing is slightly different, that they aren't so much going for the full-on, in-your-face consumerism of Christmas, but actually what I've noticed is that they're trying still to promote themselves, but they're also trying to focus on some of the deeper values of Christmas.

What Christmas is all about, what underpins Christmas. Take the John Lewis advert as an example. It's called The Beginner. And there's absolutely no mention whatsoever of John Lewis any way through the advert, nor are any John Lewis products mentioned, until you get to the very end and a John Lewis logo pops up on the screen.

And what you get instead is the story of a middle-aged man who is trying to skateboard. And we don't know why he's trying to skateboard until you get to the final scene. And in the final scene, there's a social worker who arrives at his door, and there's a teenage girl beside her, and she's carrying a skateboard in her hand.

And so John Lewis said that they were using their Christmas ad to raise awareness of children in care and of foster care this Christmas. That's John Lewis, or take Lidl as another example.

[1 : 3 9] If you've been to Lidl, you'll have seen the Lidl Bear. And Lidl, in their Christmas ad, if you've seen it, they, of course, promote themselves, buy one, get one free on turkey, Brussels sprouts, Christmas pudding, all the rest of it.

But the story is really of this bear who wears this jumper that has been shrunk in a washing machine and tumble dryer by a little girl's dad. And the story of the advert is essentially the story of the bear who goes from rags to riches, who finds fame and fortune, who becomes a celebrity, and then at the end he comes to his senses and he realizes what matters most, and that is being at home with his family at Christmas.

And so whether it's Lidl or whether it's John Lewis or any other brand, isn't it good that we're being told about what really matters at Christmas? It's not the consumerism, and it's not the stuff.

It's people. It's relationships. It's family. It's being with one another. It's caring for one another. And it's giving what we have to those who are in need.

And we can get this, can't we? We get that there is a deeper meaning to Christmas than all that the shops will tell us. We know in our hearts and in our heads there is more to life than just material possessions.

[3 : 0 3] And we sense that there is something deeper to Christmas, deeper than just what we see on a surface level. There's more to turkey, more to Christmas than turkey, and trees and tinsel and time off work.

But we don't just know there's more to Christmas than this. In our hearts, we actually want more than this. Deep down, we want to be known.

We want to be loved. We want to be cared for. We want to belong to a family. We seek meaningful relationships where we give and also where we can receive.

And that is why we need the true message of Christmas. And yet, sadly, so many people think that the old story of Christmas is completely irrelevant in our society and it's completely irrelevant for our lives today.

And that's why the message of Christmas told to us in the Bible is often rejected as just being simply unbelievable. There's no way all of that stuff could have happened so long ago.

[4 : 10] And I'm sure that's what's behind Lidl's Christmas advertising campaign with the bear. They say in their strapline for Christmas, a Christmas you can believe in.

A Christmas you can believe in. And so the subtle message is, the Christmas message in the Bible isn't really something that you can believe in. And yet, when we unwrap the Christmas message, we discover that it gives us exactly what we need and more than we desire.

It tells us that Christmas is the only solution to our human condition, to our human problem. So Christmas meets our greatest need and it fulfills our greatest desires.

And that's what we find in our final Bible reading that we had read to us just a moment ago from John chapter 1 in the Bible. It is one of the most famous, popular Christmas Bible readings.

But did you notice that John, as he tells the story of Jesus and his entrance into this world, John doesn't mention what happened at Christmas. And so there's no classic nativity scene.

[5 : 19] There's no Mary, no Joseph, no Bethlehem, no star, no angels, no shepherds, no wise men, no King Herod. And there isn't even a baby Jesus in a manger.

So what's John doing? Well, he's less interested in telling us what happened at Christmas and he's far more concerned to tell us what Christmas means. And what he says stretches our minds and yet when we believe it, it changes our lives.

Because the astounding message of Christmas is that God has made himself known to us through the coming of Jesus into this world so that we can be welcomed into God's family and become one of his children.

And so Jesus is the ultimate Christmas gift that we need to receive. And John tells us why. Back at the beginning of his reading, he starts by taking us further back than the birth of Jesus.

Listen. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

[6 : 31] The Word is Jesus. Now John is deliberately echoing the very first words of the Bible here. We're back at the beginning in Genesis. We read, in the beginning God created.

And John's saying, in the beginning was the Word. Now his original readers who were familiar with the Old Testament, they knew that God's Word does many things.

By his Word, God creates, God reveals, God accomplishes his purposes. And so by calling Jesus the Word, we're being told that Jesus also does all of this.

And so Jesus is God's self-expression. And so while the word refers to Jesus, John uses the Greek word logos. And it was a common term when John wrote these things back in the first century.

And so for John's readers who weren't familiar with the Old Testament, scriptures, the Bible, in Greek philosophy, the logos meant reason or logic.

[7 : 36] In fact, our word logic comes from the word logos. And so it described the logical principle by which everything existed. The force that brought reason and purpose to the universe.

And so when John refers to Jesus in this way, he isn't just saying that Jesus is the reason for the season. He's saying that Jesus is the reason for our existence. And he explains why.

Because the Word is described as distinct from God. The Word was with God. And yet the Word is also identified as God. The Word was God.

Listen again. Through him, all things were made. Without him, nothing was made that has been made. So there's a sense in which we could say that Jesus is the ultimate designer baby because he created everything.

And so we sing as children, twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are up above the world so high like a diamond in the sky. But if you leave Jesus out of creation, all you can sing is, twinkle, twinkle, little star, I don't wonder what you are.

[8 : 49] You're the cooling down of gases in the shape of solid masses. So science might explain how, but Jesus explains why.

Stephen Hawking, who was a theoretical physicist, he's now dead, he said this in his popular book, A Brief History of Time. He said, the eventual goal of science is to provide a single theory that describes the whole universe.

And what John is saying here is that there's a single person who explains everything. His name is Jesus, the Word. And that's why we read, in him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. So Jesus is the origin and source of life and light. And so just like an unborn baby depends on its mother for life, so all of us, humanity, depends on Jesus.

We read that Jesus is also the source of revelation. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

[10 : 02] In other words, Jesus came into the world to reveal God to us and to show us what life is all about. And this is emphasized in the climactic verse in this reading, in John 1, verse 14, where we read, the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. And that is the staggering claim of Christianity.

The Word, who was with God and was God, became flesh. Jesus, God the Son, became a human being.

Of course, he never stopped being God, but he took on flesh to live in our world of space and time. And so when we're told he made his dwelling among us, it literally means that he pitched his tent here.

He lived among us on this earth for a while. Because it's also a reference to the tabernacle in the Old Testament. Now, the tabernacle was basically a tent that was set up in the desert.

[11 : 12] And it was a place where God would dwell with his people. And the glory of God would fill the tent. And nobody could enter the tent or else they would die.

And now John's saying that in Jesus, John has seen his glory. Because Jesus came from God the Father, he says, full of grace and truth.

Now, just think about what this means for a moment. The creator of the universe and the sustainer of all life became a fetus in the womb.

The powerful became powerless. The word became speechless. The invulnerable became vulnerable. The unapproachable became touchable.

The eternal became killable. I heard a story of a primary school teacher. She taught the class of six-year-olds. And one day, she didn't know what to do with them, so she gave them a project.

[12 : 14] And she said, right, today we're going to do some painting. I want you to paint a picture. And the only condition is you can paint anything you want to paint. And so she set them off with their paint and their paper.

And they were the usual pictures. As she walked around the classroom, she could see family, pets, seaside, sunshine, houses, playgrounds. But then the teacher looked at one boy's painting and she couldn't make out what he was trying to paint.

It looked like a mess. And so she asked him, what is that? And he said, oh, that's God. And she said, but nobody's ever seen God.

To which he replied, well, he will when I'm finished. Now this is the astounding claim of Christmas. Just listen again to how John puts it at the end of our Bible reading.

He says, no one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father has made him known.

[13 : 16] Do you hear what John's saying happened on that very first Christmas? That Jesus came to make God the Father known to us. Which means we should never think that somehow God is distant or remote or that God is hiding or that God is inaccessible.

As a minister, so often I'm told by people, you know, Jonathan, I would believe in God. If only he could just make himself a bit more obvious. If only he was clearer.

If only he could reveal himself in a special way. Then I'd be convinced. Then I would believe. And yet the reality is, as John tells us, that the guessing games about what God is like are over in Jesus.

So if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Now this week on social media and Netflix, there's been a lot of fuss about the Harry and Meghan documentary.

And, just hands up, I haven't watched it. Of course, I wouldn't want to invade their privacy because they're such a private couple, so I wouldn't want to be watching it. But it's resulted in a lot of attention, not just for Harry and Meghan, but also, in contrast, for William and Kate.

[14 : 31] And it's almost as if they've been compared and contrasted with one another. And I read a really nice story about Prince William this week, where, on a cold winter's night back in December 2009, he slept rough in central London.

And it was all arranged for a charity for the homeless. And he was one of the patrons of this charity. And so he slept outside in a sleeping bag next to some wheelie bins near Blackfriars Bridge in London.

And he said it was really to help him understand, in a small way, what it was like to be homeless. And good for him for trying to experience homelessness before he then went back to his royal palace.

But do you know what Christmas tells us? It says that when Jesus came to earth, he didn't just come to experience humanity before going back to his throne in heaven.

No, he stooped far lower than just being born. Yes, he came to be one of us. But it was so he could die for us.

[15 : 40] And that's why the eternal son of God took on physical human flesh. Jesus came to give life and light to those who believe.

Because we all know, don't we, that we actually live in darkness. And we all face death. And it's the darkness of our sin and it separates us from God.

It cuts us off from eternal life. Meaning that we are condemned to eternal death. And we don't like to think that our sin is really too much of a big deal when it comes to God.

And I think it's because we like to imagine God as being a bit like Father Christmas. He's up in the sky, up in heaven, a bit like Santa. He's got his list. He's got those who are naughty, those who are nice.

And he somehow works on the basis of rewarding those who are good and punishing those who are bad. And as long as we think, as long as our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds, then we're fine with God.

[16 : 43] And yet, that is not how we relate to God. In fact, that's not how we relate to anyone in any kind of meaningful relationship, is it? And so the Bible tells us that because God is just, he must punish our sins.

And yet God is loving and so he wants to forgive our sins. And that's why Jesus came full of grace and truth.

to tell us the truth about ourselves. We're separated from God and yet to extend the hand of grace to say, you can come back. Jesus came to do what we can never do for ourselves.

Jesus came, he became flesh so that he could live a perfect life, the life that we should have lived. and Jesus became flesh so he could die on a cross, dying in our place, dying for the way that we've turned away from God.

Because only human flesh can die. So the word became flesh. And Jesus died on a cross to pay for our sin, to restore our broken relationship with God.

[18 : 00] And that's why Christmas confronts us, every one of us. It confronts us with the need to respond to Jesus Christ. And I wonder if you noticed in that reading from John chapter 1 the two different reactions that John gave to Jesus.

We can either reject Jesus or we can receive Jesus. First of all, reject. Listen again. He was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. John's speaking about the rejection of Jesus. And it's shocking, isn't it, that the world that he made and he owns didn't even recognize him when he came.

It's as if Jesus entered his own property, the world he made and owns and the very people he'd given life to he had let live in his world did not receive him.

And Jesus continues to be rejected. Rejected because many people just think they don't need him. And yet they miss out on the life and the light that he brings.

[19 : 16] And that's the wrong response is to reject Jesus. And yet there's a right response too. And that is to receive Jesus. Listen again.

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. Children born not of natural descent nor of human decision or a husband's will but born of God.

So John's speaking about receiving Jesus. He's saying some did receive him by believing in his name. Because when we receive Jesus, then God receives us into his family.

We become a child of God. Able to call him father. And so Christmas time is a time for giving and receiving, isn't it?

God gave the gift of his son, Jesus, to us. And what do you do when you get a gift? Do you just sit it under the Christmas tree, look at it, watch it, maybe put it in the cupboard afterwards?

[20 : 22] No, when you get a gift, you receive it, you open it, because that's the only way you'll ever benefit from that gift. And so the question is, have you received Jesus Christ?

Christ? Because you can do that now. Why wait? Why continue to reject him when you can make this your best Christmas ever by receiving him into your life?

Because that is the way for us to be received into God's family. And a relationship with God is what we were made for. It is what we all need.

And it is the only relationship that will satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. Now that is a Christmas you can believe in. so copies of' and yes you can■