

## HEAVEN CAME DOWN TO EARTH

Isaiah 9. 2-7  
Hebrews 1. 1-4  
John 1. 1 – 14

I speak to you in the name of the † Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Happy Christmas, everyone! It is a great joy for me to be with you on this holy day as we celebrate the Incarnation of our Lord and his coming to earth in the form of a small, new-born baby.

You may have been surprised a moment ago to hear that there were no references to a small, new-born baby in our gospel reading. Our text from St John's gospel is very different. St John is like a modern or post-modern artist; in giving us his version of the Christmas story, he doesn't paint a homey scene on his gospel canvas showing a mother and a child. Instead, he uses the broad strokes of his paintbrush to create provocative images, images that encourage us to think about the larger picture.

You see, when St John wrote his gospel and wanted to describe the birth and incarnation of Jesus, he was faced with a challenge. One generation had already passed since the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke were written. Christianity had spread to the Greek-speaking world. No longer was the Church basically Jewish; to the contrary, many, if not most church members were Gentiles. And this meant that the Jewish terms that were used in the other three gospels were not easily understood by St John's non-Jewish audience.<sup>1</sup>

St John looked at the lexicon of the Greek tradition and chose a word that the Greeks would be able to understand. He opens his gospel as follows: 'In the beginning was

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<sup>1</sup> In the Christmas accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, they speak of a 'Messiah' who has come into the world. In Greek, the word for Messiah is Christos, and it literally means 'the Anointed One'. Yet this was difficult to explain to a Greek person who was unfamiliar with the Hebrew Bible, and who did not relate to the age-old longing of Jewish people for a Deliverer.

the *Word*, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (1. 1). The Word, or *Logos* as it is translated in Greek, was part of the Greeks' religious vocabulary. For the Greeks, *Logos* was their way of referring to Reason personified; it was their way of speaking about the principle of divine order under which the universe continued to exist. It's as if St John were saying to the Greeks, 'For centuries, you've been thinking and writing and dreaming about the *Logos*, the power which created and sustains the order of the world, the power by which one comes into contact with the Divine. Well, I've got good news for you! Jesus Christ is the *Logos*.'

And as he wrote about our Lord as *Logos*, St John was politically correct (he was what we would now call 'inclusive'); he used a word that his fellow Jews could understand as well. For the Jews, their Hebrew word for *Logos* ('dabar') did not refer to a divine principle of reason, as the Greeks understood it; rather, it referred to something that was much more active.

In Jewish thought, a *word* was much more than a mere sound uttered by a mouth or written down on a page. A word was something which had its own existence, and which actually did things. To understand what the Jews meant by 'word', we almost have to link it up with the term 'deed'. In the Hebrew Bible, God created the world by a word: 'And God said...and it was so', we keep reading in Genesis. By the word of Lord, the prophets were sent forth. For the Jews, the 'word' meant energy and movement and action, rather than merely thought and contemplation. And so when the Jews read about *Logos* at the beginning of John's gospel, it was as if he were saying to them, 'The Divine word that spoke creation into being; the Divine word that motivated the psalmists and sent out the prophets; that Divine word is Jesus Christ.'

It is only in verse 14 of this first part of St John's gospel – this passage that is commonly called 'the Prologue'<sup>2</sup>– that St John finally writes, 'The Word *became flesh*

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<sup>2</sup> The words of the Prologue were taken undoubtedly from a hymn that was sung frequently by the early Christian Church.

and made his dwelling among us.’ Jesus, the Word, *Logos*, came to earth as a small, new-born baby.

When we say that our Lord came to earth as a small, new-born baby, we’re not saying that some part of God, some spark of divinity, came to be with Jesus while the real God remained behind. No, God cannot be separated out like that. The three-personed God, the Holy Trinity, is eternally one. As our Lord constantly reiterated, you cannot have the Son without the Father or the Father without the Son, and you can’t have either without the Holy Spirit.

So we must truly say that when the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, *God* was born at Bethlehem. *God* was lifted lovingly by human hands, cleaned and wrapped in cloths. *God* was laid at Mary’s breast to feed with contentment. *God* slept while angels sang to shepherds in the field. *God* joined the human race. When the Word became flesh, heaven came down to earth.

But there is more. With the incarnation of our Lord on earth, God is for ever changed. At Christmas, it’s as if God began a new relationship with his creation. Athanasius, one of the great theologians of the early Church, went so far as to say that since the Son of God was not always incarnate in human flesh, the birth at Bethlehem marked an entirely new era in the life of God. Ever since Jesus’ birth, God and humanity are welded together in Jesus Christ in a very special way.

But as we consider afresh this great mystery, the Word that was made flesh and that made his dwelling among us, we must focus just for a moment on one other broad brush stroke on John’s gospel canvas: Jesus Christ, the Word, the *Logos*, is the true light that gives light to everyone.

If we wanted to do so, you and I could attend a course in physics and learn a lot of things about light. Ask Stephen Hawking, who holds the Newton chair at the University of Cambridge. He'll tell you that light is the ultimate constant in the universe; that it always travels 186,000 miles per second; and that light transmits energy, radiation and information. Or we could ask one of the young children in our church to hold a prism up to the sunlight, so that we could see the spectrum of a rainbow. Physics can tell us a great deal about light. But there is one thing that physics has never explained, and that is, what do we mean exactly by the word 'light'? What is it? We know it when we see it, but we can't really explain what it is. Unlike space or time, light cannot be defined against anything else. Light simply exists; or it doesn't.

Well, St John was no physicist, but he gives a wonderful insight into light in his magnificent introduction to his gospel. When he tells us that Jesus Christ, the *Logos*, is the true light, not only does he say that he gives light to everyone; he also says that the light of Jesus is *life-giving*. As St John puts it in verse 4, 'in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.' This is why Jesus said later on that whoever follows him will have the *light of life*. Our Lord is the light of the world; and his light is life-giving.

As we look at the world in which we live, we have only too many reminders of darkness, don't we? We see darkness in poverty, in sickness and in injustice. We see darkness in politics, institutions and in corporations. And unfortunately, we also see darkness in people; we see fallen-ness and hurt in others, and also in ourselves.

You may or may not have seen the three films based on JRR Tolkien's novel, *The Hobbit*. One of the very memorable scenes of the second film shows Gandalf, the wizard, as he comes into a face-to-face confrontation with the powers of darkness, represented by Sauron. And as the two characters battle, Sauron says to Gandalf,

rather ominously, “darkness will conquer everything”; and the film finishes without letting the viewer know whether Sauron is right or not. The third film in the trilogy shows that he is wrong. But long before JRR Tolkien ever dreamt up *The Hobbit*, St John wrote about Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the true light, who came to earth; and he claimed, ‘the light shines in the darkness’ and ‘the darkness has not overcome it’. The Light of the world overcomes all darkness.

This truth of the Incarnation, this Christmas truth, is precious good news for you and me today. Because when Christ came into the world as a small, new-born baby, he came not only as light; he came as light shining in the darkness. He came as light *breaking into* the darkness. It’s as if the Creation story that we read about in Genesis were happening all over again.<sup>3</sup>

Dear friends, the good news of Christmas is that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us! And Jesus Christ, that Word, is the light that overcomes any darkness; he is the light that will enlighten our lives; and he is the light that will empower our living.

Glory to God in the highest!

+ Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one of the names given to Jesus by ancient tradition was Dayspring – the first ray of light of God’s new dawning day.