

John 1 , 1 -5

I enjoy the traditional Carol service of 9 lessons and carols, don't you? This morning's Gospel reading is always there, as a sort of bridge between the Old and the New Testaments. It's a beautiful and poetic reading, the sort of thing Sir John Geilgud could read and make you tremble with the drama and the power of the words. But as I read part of it to my grandson yesterday all he heard was gobbledegook. To him it was completely unintelligible "What on earth is that all about Grandma, I didn't understand a word of it"

As **we** all know the word referred to here is Jesus Christ. The Greek word is Logos.

It seems a strange title for Jesus and if we are to understand anything of what John meant when he called Jesus 'the word' we have to try to understand who he was talking to.

The earliest Christian Church had been made up of Jews, who had a background of Old Testament Scripture. They understood about the expected Messiah, and had no problem seeing Jesus as the fulfilment of the promise of God to send a Saviour to the world.

But by the time John was writing at the turn of the first Century AD, the church was mainly Greek. Their religious background was very different from that of the Jews, they did not know the Hebrew Scriptures, so the Apostle John was seeking to find a way to explain to **them** just who Jesus was as well .

Here was the perfect solution, both cultures were familiar with the concept of the word of God. It crossed over the cultural divide.

To the Jews a word was a very important and powerful thing. Jews were very careful about words. In fact the old Hebrew language had only about 10,000 words in it's vocabulary, compared to about 200,000 in the Greek. They had a concept of words having a power of their own, so should be used sparingly. Once a word is spoken it could not be recalled. With the power of his word God created the world and all that is, he spoke and the world came into being, words had a spiritual power that made things happen and when God spoke whole worlds sprang into life.

"The Word of God" was also used commonly as God's name because like Voldemort in the Harry Potter books God was known as "He who should not be named" So when John used 'word' for Jesus they knew exactly what was meant.

The Greeks also had the word of God in their religious and philosophical writings. Five centuries before Jesus a philosopher called Heraclitus had held that the world was ordered by the word of God. He had observed that the world was not haphazard in any way, it had been created and it ran in a controlled and systematic way so this must be the activity of the word of God.

So what John did in these opening lines of his Gospel was to agree with both cultures, and say to both Jewish and Greek Christians that Jesus himself was the word of God, it was a concept that they both understood very clearly.

As a church have we something to learn from John? How does the world around us relate to the Biblical pictures of Jesus. What does your next door neighbour's children or your grandchildren think of the Jesus as the word of God. Would it mean anything to them at all. In this world of Twitter and sound bites should we be looking for ways of expressing who Jesus is to a culture that has not got the Christian background that many of us grew up in.

I applaud groups of Christians and individuals who are seeking to interpret the Gospel into our modern culture. I know that we may not like it, but the world is as it is, and it is vitally important that they hear about Jesus, in a way that they can understand and relate to, as the Greeks and Jews who made up the early church could relate to Jesus as the word, the logos.

The truths about Jesus are the same, and people need to know the truth. And here in the first few verses of John's gospel are some of the truths about Jesus that we still need to communicate, so I hope to go through these briefly this morning.

Firstly :

'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.'

John is here telling us about the pre-existence of Jesus. He was there before the world was made, he was with God, and he was God. His nature, everything about him was the same as God's. This means of course that everything about God is and always was the same as Jesus.

If we read the Old Testament we might be excused for thinking that the God it appears to be revealing sometimes is a long way from the nature of Jesus. There are stories that make God seem like a tyrant, seeking the deaths of scores of innocent people. This week there have been controversy as Steven Fry, who is an atheist has denounced the God he doesn't believe in as a monster, and in some places the Old Testament we can see God is depicted like that. Unfortunately what Steven Fry failed to see was that God as revealed by Jesus is the exact opposite of this. Was this a different God, has he changed? John's Gospel says no! God has always been the same, he has always been Christ-like, longing to forgive and heal and help. It is man's understanding of him that was warped. This is why Jesus came, to reveal to the world just what God is really like.

When Jesus came the misunderstandings ended, there is no doubt now about the nature of God. John states it boldly: God is love. We know because of Jesus, the word of God.

Secondly:

‘He was in the beginning with God, all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.’

Whatever you believe about the practicalities of creation, the big bang theory or primeval soup it cannot negate the truth of the facts as John expresses them.

This is spiritual truth, it doesn't seek to explain how the world came into being but something of the goodness that was behind it.

At the time that this gospel was written there was a popular heresy in the church called Gnosticism. By a complicated set of reasoning they had come to the conclusion that the earth was created by an evil god, something like Steven Fry's monster. Not by the God and Father of Jesus Christ, the God of Love. Hence sin had come into the world not by man's doing, but by the inherent evil at work in the world. Therefore there was no redemption in this world, the object was to get out of it by means of special knowledge, which was a secret that had to be discovered.

John is here deliberately stating the opposite point of view to refute these people. Jesus was there in the beginning, he it was who made the world, nothing was made without him, so it follows that creation is good and full of the love of God.

This is still fact, yes the world has a lot of evil in it, but evil is brought about by the sin of humanity. But the way God wants us to tackle this is not to withdraw from it and try to escape, but to get in there, taking the love of God with us. Jesus came, preaching to prostitutes and sinners, but it was the good religious, people in their holy huddles who killed him. Christians believe that there is redemption, there is forgiveness, because God who made the world lived and died to bring the love and forgiveness of God, not to a chosen few, but to anyone who will listen.

Thirdly:

‘In him was life and that life was the light of men, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.’ Or in our translation, ‘understood it’.

God who made the world is the life and the light; he is all that human beings need to live in this world. He didn't abandon the world he created, he didn't just wind it up, set it in motion and retreat to live happily ever after in heaven. No, he is intimately involved with his creation. And he provides all we need to live in the world he made. He gives us his light.

There is no doubt that the world is a dark place. There is a lot of evil about. Sometimes it seems that evil is about to conquer and there is no hope, but Jesus always brings light. I remember talking a few years ago to friends in Northern Ireland. They are in Christian ministry, working to bring peace and reconciliation into what we now call the Troubles, and they could see no hope at all.

But now there is hope there, more than a little light, we have seen years of relative peace.

We can easily despair of a solution to the evil and violence in our world but we must keep on praying and trusting God to bring his life and light there into the darkness that often seems so triumphant.

This is the third wonderful truth about Jesus that John proclaims at the beginning of his gospel. Jesus came to bring the light of God into the world and nothing can ever change that. And where Christians are, there is the light of God. So it follows that wherever you and I go, there is Jesus and we take the light with us. Think about what that means for you.

So three things about Jesus at the beginning of John's gospel. 1. God is unchanging, he is love and Jesus is the image of himself, sent to reveal him to the world. 2. He made the world and he made it good even if it has been spoiled by sin. 3. And he is the light of the world, where there is his life, there is light and the darkness that is in the world can never overcome the light of Christ. It is a message of hope, a message of peace, a message that is now ours to communicate to a new generation.