

The Word made Flesh ...

... God is our Origin

A sermon given on the Second Sunday before Lent, 4th February 2024 – by the Curate, the Revd Charlie Shefford, in Beverley Minster

John 1:1-14

I'm not sure how you feel, but I find it slightly strange hearing the opening of John's gospel outside of the Christmas season, and it might seem a particularly strange choice for this time of year. The reading makes sense at Christmas: we're celebrating the Incarnation; the Word becoming flesh and living among us; the birth of Jesus. But Christmas is now far behind us and Easter is still quite a way away, and we're only a week and a half away from Lent. So what does the opening of John's gospel have to tell us, to teach us and to draw our attention to at this time of year, where it might not be immediately obvious when we hear it read at Christmas?

In the history of Christian art and icons, the four gospel writers, the evangelists, are represented by different animals: Matthew is depicted as a human being because his gospel opens with a long genealogy, all the way from Abraham down to Joseph; Mark is the lion because his gospel is direct and immediate, getting straight into the action beginning with Jesus's baptism - as well, throughout Mark's gospel you'll hear lots of 'straight away', 'immediately', 'at once' - it's a very punchy gospel; Luke is the ox because the ox was one of the most common animals for sacrifice, and his gospel emphasises the sacrificial nature of Jesus's ministry.

Now, all these symbols are ultimately slightly arbitrary, and you could quite easily make arguments for any of the three gospel writers being depicted as any of the three animals. But the symbol for the fourth evangelist, John, seems perfectly suited - John is depicted as an eagle. This is because he flew higher than all the other evangelists, reaching the nearest to heaven. It is in John's Gospel that Jesus's divinity is made most explicit. In our reading today John initially draws our attention away from the earthly and towards God the Word in heaven - *'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'* - before drawing our attention back down to the created world through the incarnation, the true light which lightens everyone was coming into the world - *'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him.'*

By talking about God and creation and talking about them in that order respectively, John is making a point about how we relate to the divine and the earthly. Creation (that is, you and I,

other people, the material world) is all good in itself. The problem arises when creation rather than God becomes our primary attachment. This means acting as though creation itself were our ultimate end, being wholly dependent on people and material possessions for our identity. John wants us to view and relate to creation incarnationally: to recognise God as our origin; to acknowledge that human beings and the material world are not commodities at our disposal - they originate from God and belong to Him. And when we view creation in this way, we are able to cultivate what St. John of the Cross calls 'detachment from creation'. This is not indifference towards creation, but viewing it for what it is: finite; temporal; created. Instead, we cultivate attachment to the one thing that is worthy of single-minded attachment - God.

Picture in your mind a time you met someone who was very materialistic, who consumed far in excess of their needs. On the other hand, think of a time you met someone who was more ascetic and renounced excess and over-consuming, who consumed more within their needs. The materialistic person, despite being more obsessed with creation, misses the ultimate purpose of creation and ultimately misuses it. Whereas the ascetic who thinks of the material world less, actually demonstrates a genuine love and care for creation and reflects this love in the service of others. This is the difference between mis-using and properly-using creation. In detachment from the material and temporal and attachment to God,. We are able to forsake our personal will to God's will, to free ourselves from self-interest and the need for approval and recognition from others. And we are able to recognise our complete dependence upon God, our creator and redeemer.

And so, although it may sound counterintuitive, detachment allows us to more fully serve and love others. The basis of our spiritual life - what we are able to recognise by the light of the incarnation - is that we are created and we are wholly dependent on God our creator. To act out this truth in the world is to walk in humility and obedience to God's will and to live out the loving service of Christ to all.

Reading Text

John 1:1-14

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him 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, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of 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.