

## SERMON FOR SUNDAY 3<sup>RD</sup> JANUARY 2021

### Paying homage

**SLIDE 1** I wonder if you recognise this figure? (*PowerPoint photo of one of the magi – from a small nativity set on one of the windowsills in the church.*)



Today is the Sunday closest to Epiphany, so our lectionary offered us choices about which gospel reading we would have – either the reading from the first chapter of John’s gospel, which we have heard, or the gospel reading about the journey of the Magi from the East as they sought to offer homage to the newborn King. I chose the reading from the gospel of John, rather than from Matthew, but as you can see from the sermon’s title, I would still like us to keep this image of offering homage – of reverence before God – at the forefront of our minds. We will come back to it.

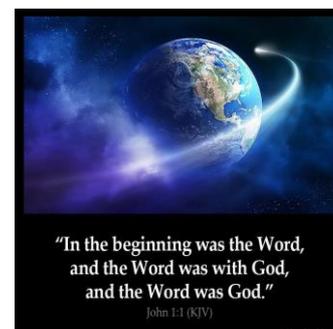
John’s gospel begins with a mind-boggling description of Jesus as the pre-existent Word – the Word who was with God “in the beginning” and through whom God made all things, but who became a human being and came to live among us. People have written whole books on the prologue to John’s gospel and even on individual verses from it. William Barclay describes the first chapter of the Fourth Gospel as “one of the greatest adventures of religious thought ever achieved by the mind of man.” That’s not quite how I would put it, but Barclay’s words certainly convey some sense of the complexity and beauty of the ideas expressed in this Bible passage – and the response of awe and wonder which it justly engenders.

*[Christology explanation]* When I studied Christology at Otago University I was impressed when the lecturer, Professor Ivor Davidson, began the intensive course by saying to us that the start and end of Christology is worship. I thought that was a courageous thing to do at a secular university. But also essential.

While I have been attempting to grapple with ideas that are, and I believe will always remain, largely mysterious to us, I have (literally) dusted off a few Theology texts, including this one by Millard Erickson, which has a title derived from John 1. *[The Word Became Flesh.]* Nonetheless, I think it is likely that what I will say will raise more questions than answers for you – and at that point if you would like to do some reading, I can recommend some good books!

## SLIDE 2

John’s gospel is the only place in the Bible in which Jesus called “The Word” or “Logos”. John was writing for an audience of both Jews and Greeks and, in this context, his use of “The WORD” is spectacularly brilliant because it was a concept which already meant a lot to both of these communities. While their understandings were different, there was a common thread between them. The Jews (and we, too, I imagine) would remember that the book of Genesis portrays God speaking things into being – especially as John’s prologue starts with those evocative words “In the beginning...”. “By the Word of the Lord the



heavens were made.” The Old Testament also equates God’s Word with Wisdom (who is personified in the book of Proverbs).

The Greeks spoke of a logical principle of order at the heart of the universe, the source of order and arrangement and design. They saw in “the Logos, the Word, the Reason of God” the creating and the guiding and the directing power of God. John told them, “Jesus is that Logos come down to earth.”

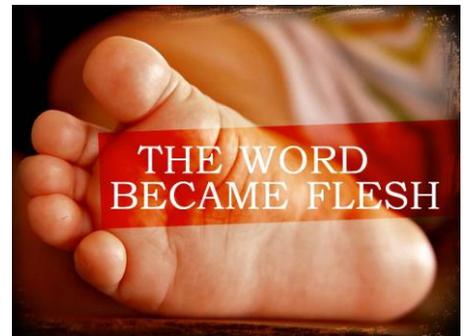
In writing about the “Word” that became flesh, then, John was using language that both Jews and Greeks could connect with.

“The word became a human being, and full of grace and truth, lived among us.” (vs 14) We know this as the doctrine of the *incarnation*. As you probably know, the word incarnate comes from Latin and means “*in the flesh*” (*in=in, carnis=flesh*). And it’s this concept I would like to turn to now.

### SLIDE 3

Millard Erickson writes: “The most amazing assertion is that ‘the Word became flesh’:

“The reference is not to some timeless occurrence, but to a specific event at a specific point in history. Note that John does not say that Word “appeared as” or “showed himself in” flesh, but that he actually “became” flesh and “dwelt among us”. The term is a strong one, which literally means “tabernacled among us” or “pitched his tent among us”. It conveys the idea of a lengthy period of residence rather than a temporary visit.” ... And why has he done this? “The Word has come to reveal life, light, grace, truth, and even God himself.”



I am rather a fan of the writing of Michael Mayne, the former Dean of Westminster Abbey, and I believe I may have quoted him in a recent sermon, because a book of his sermons given around the seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany has recently been published, and I have been reading it during this season in the church calendar. Michael Mayne writes about the incarnation again and again, and he does it so evocatively and reverently that I certainly can’t improve on what he says!

Christmas comes to remind us of a truth that has the power to transform our lives. It speaks of a birth and of a life like ours, and yet unlike. For the man this child of Bethlehem became shows us God. Not God in all his unimaginable power and majesty, but God revealing himself in the only terms in which we can recognize or understand him – in our terms – in terms of a baby at his mother’s breast, a man who heals and forgives and loves and consoles and encourages those he meets: a man who washes his friends’ feet and breaks bread with them, who dies in agony on a cross and whom death cannot hold. This man gives God a human face. And what Christmas proclaims is at once beautifully simple and strangely mysterious. It is this: God is Christlike,

Or, as it says in John 1:18: “No-one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.”

**And in another sermon Michael Mayne writes:**

I am like this!’ When Jesus says ‘He who has seen me’ – that is to say, my compassion, my vulnerability, my desire to serve, my concern for the undesirables – ‘he who has seen me has seen the Father’, he isn’t making a claim about himself. He isn’t saying: ‘I am Godlike.’ He is declaring the truth about God. He is saying: ‘God, who is your Father, is Christlike.’

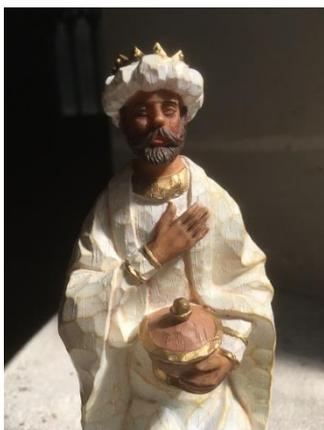
Michael Mayne also tells a lovely story about attending a service in Westminster Abbey at which the words “The Word became flesh” struck him with new force. It was a service marking the centenary for the Royal Association for the Deaf. *[Speak about this.]*

### SLIDE THREE

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” God speaks to us in language we can understand, primarily through Jesus, who is the same “yesterday and today and forever,” (Hebrews 13:8) but also in other ways today. Perhaps through: Theological study(!) or reading, or conversations with friends, or through a painting or a piece of music or time spent in nature... and, importantly, I think, in silence.



### SLIDE FOUR



Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “to speak of Christ ... will be to speak within the context of the silence of the church. We must study Christology in the humble silence of the worshipping community”<sup>1</sup>. So this is where we come back to that image of the humble figure of the wise man kneeling before the infant Jesus.

Craufurd Murray - “A faith which is not afraid to reason, and a reason which is not ashamed to adore.”

*We have a few moments of silence, and then sing the hymn “Let all mortal flesh keep silence.”*

<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 27-28