



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church December 24, 2014

John 1: 1-14

It's very interesting to step back and look at the multicultural nature of the Christmas celebrations that we share and that go on around us. The stories in the Gospels tell of a clash of culture between the Romans and the Judeans, the interpretation of those stories blends Greek and Jewish thought that then gains a Roman overlay in the official setting of Christmas at the December equinox which then goes on to gain the European winter overlay, that then goes on to gain the gift giving and family celebrations and then, in more recent years all the story telling around Christmas, Santa, winter etc., particularly in children's animation. It is almost a case that we are being counter cultural in sticking to the Gospel accounts in our Christmas celebrations! But, as I said, this blend of culture has always been there, mainly due to the mixed culture of the early church, and I think it's of value to try to recover the important message of Christmas that spoke, with power, to all the cultures of the early church.

'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.'

In this simple phrase John very cleverly speaks both to the Jewish members of the church and to those from a Greek background. The Jews would read this sentence and think both of the creation – 'in the beginning' – and of wisdom, the knowledge of God and the Law that they knew from Proverbs – 'the Lord created me as the beginning of His work.' The Greeks would similarly think of the dawn of creation and their belief that Word – reason – was the basis of creation. And John builds on this dual understanding by talking about the Word being a light that gives light to people; the Jews again thinking of wisdom and the knowledge of the Law and the Greeks thinking of reason and rational thought. However, then John reaches out to both his audiences to try to get them to look beyond their culture to the new kingdom of God. He writes something that would cause both the Jewish and the Greek readers to stop and seriously question John; "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." A sentence bordering on blasphemy to the Jews and nonsense to the Greeks.

To the Jews God was God, holy and unapproachable; no one can ever see God and live. The idea that God could take on human form, and live with us, was unacceptable. The Messiah might be called the son of God but only in the sense that all those given authority on earth are sons of God, as Psalm 82 says. However, God was still God in heaven and men were still men on earth.

To the Greeks the idea was nonsense because the gods were perfect and holy and the flesh was evil and corrupt; it was nonsense that holy could become flesh.

John entices his readers by making them think that he is affirming their ideas and then, suddenly, he hits them with the new truth; the Word became flesh. And, as they read on in the Gospel he keeps coming back to this truth; in Jesus God has broken down the idea that heaven and earth are separate, contradictory concepts. Jesus tells Nicodemus that God loves the world; this world is not some sort of divine accident or unintentional half way step to the real world of the spirit. The wisdom that the Jews saw at the creation was to create this world, this place of flesh. The reason that the Greeks saw at the creation was the very reasonable idea of people and this world of flesh. God created the physical world as an act of deliberate will and deliberate love; God wanted this world, created it in love and proclaimed it good.

In picturing Jesus as the Word – the wisdom or the reason of God - John was trying to get across a big idea. Jesus as the ultimate expression of the will of God to be in relationship with the creation; the Word which has become flesh.

This physical world in which we live and move and have influence is the creation of God; the idea that the world is somehow inherently evil and only the spirit within us is good is refuted in the very human baby given to a very human family. Jesus' birth is God's undeniable embrace of humanity and the world. One of the prophecies of Christmas reads 'when she who is in travail gives birth;' God even embraces the stresses and pain of childbirth in becoming flesh. God embraces the struggles, the work and the simplicity of life in Judea and Galilee. In the given Law, while the most important parts are spiritual Law - love of God and others - the bulk of the Law is about life; living now in this physical world. Along with the call to return to God and faith, the prophets talk about justice, generosity and mercy; living in this world now. The Word of God has always been about the flesh and now, in Jesus, the Word becomes flesh and lives with us.

Just as John spoke to both the cultures in his day, so we are called to speak to the many cultures in ours, finding what is common and understood by all and then adding what is distinctive in our faith in a way that cuts across and unifies those cultures into the kingdom. Many people regard our faith as being about eternal life; do the right thing so you can be with God when you die. But the Incarnation – the Word become flesh – says that the life that Jesus brings is life NOW – to be children of God NOW. While the end reality of salvation is eternal life, God's embrace of life in the baby shows the unchanging will of God to give and hold and bless and require of us our physical life NOW. The God who embraced the physical in creation, embraced a long, prosperous life in the Law and embraced the physical well-being of all in the words of the prophets, now embraces all our lives and all our living in the incarnation - God with us, as one of us, to bring us to life with God now and forever. Amen.