

CHRISTMAS DAY - 2023

The Rectors Christmas Sermon. My Christmas sermon was preached 3 times in the first 12 hours of Christmas; midnight at Stonham Aspal, 09:30 on Zoom and 11:00 for Earl Stonham. Watching reactions as I spoke, I think it worth sharing the text. I have edited it slightly from bullet points to text but the sense is the same.

A happy New Year to all

*In the beginning was the Word and The Word, St John tells us, became flesh and lived amongst us.*

The enduring Gospel image of Christmas is the crib scene; the baby in a manger surrounded by a mixed cast of shepherds, magi and angels. This is, of course, the moment in which The Word became flesh, but it is nowhere near the beginning of the story.

The first 14 verses of St John's Gospel are enigmatic, mystical, majestic and much, much more. They are not simple. There is no crib scene, no baby. Instead, the Christmas gospel gives us a deeply theological and philosophical challenge.

To the philosopher of St John's day there is a clear distinction between the life of a supreme being, GOD (With a Capital G), and the messy world of physical 'stuff'. Physical stuff, like you and I and the world around us, was for lesser gods.

A supreme Being must stand over and above creation; uncontaminated by it. When a god does deign to live in the physical world, home is a temple (or physical feature like Olympus) - somewhere suitably imposing. God is distant, disconnected and probably disinterested.

Against this viewpoint, John's claim is that the Word, through whom all things were made, has chosen this moment to enter into his creation. God is now not just taking an interest from afar, sending messengers or representatives. He has, for centuries, sent his representatives, the prophets but now he is taking the ultimate step; *He came to what was his own.* He entered this world, this human

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life, the same way as the rest of us; through the messy, risky path of human birth.

The gospel accounts highlight the symmetry of Jesus' earthly life. He comes in total vulnerability, totally dependent on human love and care. Then, at the end of his earthly ministry, he goes in total vulnerability, allowing aggression, fear and hostility to destroy him, for a time. God, became human, not in a palace but in a stable, parented by a lowly family. Then, as the end of his time here approaches, we see Jesus washing his disciples' feet on the night of his arrest.

John's Gospel starts and finishes with the incredible image of God, the creator of all things, humbling himself to serve his creation. Herein lies the glory that we are encouraged to see. Mary received the news of her being chosen from the archangel Gabriel. The Shepherds get the news from an entire heavenly choir, which frightened the life out of them. During Jesus' time in the wilderness, Satan tried to tempt him to call out the angels: first, to feed himself, then to stage a spectacular rescue as he jumped off the temple roof. However, this is not how Jesus chose to reveal his glory. The glory we are invited to recognise, *The glory as of a father's only son full of grace and truth* is the glory of God, the creator, serving his creation through his own choosing; as a baby in a manger, as a foot-washing rabbi.

If this is what glory looks like from God's perspective, what does that tell us about how we should look to our neighbours; near and far?