

whisper “I am thirsty”. Don’t ever think he wasn’t fully flesh. The great “I am” became flesh. He has done this for us. He took the full weight of God’s punishment so that justice could be done. I should pay. But I won’t have to.

And perhaps you’re thinking “wasn’t there another way?” “Why did Jesus have to die? It doesn’t seem fair”. And you’re right in one sense. It wasn’t fair. But it was grace. And grace isn’t fair. It is absolutely undeserved.

Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. The absolute truth about God is summed up in John’s most famous verse: For God so loved the world that He sent his one and only son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”.

This is the amazing story of Jesus. Eternal. God. Creator. Life giver. Light bringer. Made flesh to make His Father’s heart known and to take our punishment and make the way for forgiveness.

This is our God.

For many of the original hearers this was deeply shocking. They had no problem believing that Jesus could be a god but that He could be human was unthinkable. This is very different to our world where few people actually deny the human existence of Jesus. Our modern day struggle is believing that He was God. But John has put this extraordinary dilemma into four words. The Word became flesh. This is where the story of Jesus seriously ramps up. Jesus is coming into the world which will reject him, to hold out the offer of true life and true light. He is going to sacrifice himself, to take all the blame for all the people and He will hold out forgiveness and a way back to the Father.

V 14. The word became Flesh. John chose that word. "A strong, almost crude, word that stresses the reality of Christ's humanity" is how my study bible describes it. Flesh. Vulnerable. Feeling. God wrapped himself in human DNA. Stepped from eternity into a world of time and place and history. And he pitched his tent with us. And again, the original Jewish listeners (if they were still listening) would all be reminded of the tent of meeting which was filled with the glory of God back in Exodus. While Jesus was on earth those in the know saw His magnificence, they saw the glory of God.

This is almost incomprehensible but let's take our minds there. When Jesus takes on flesh his deity is never separate from his humanity. There is not a moment when we can think "now he's God" or "now he's man", Jesus is both, together at every point. It is a mystery beyond our understanding but not ever beyond our gratitude.

If John wants us to remember at every stage the Jesus is from eternal, he also never wants us to forget that Jesus is flesh. And I think sometimes we like to do that. Perhaps we try and rationalize away the pain and suffering that Jesus went through because He was God. Did he really feel the rejection of his friends? The barbs of the whips? Did He really feel the wrath of His Father? The weight of the cross? At every moment The Word was made Flesh. Sometime this weekend, find fifteen minutes to read or reread John 18 – 20, the account of Jesus trial and crucifixion and at all times be thinking Jesus is fully eternal God in control and fully feeling obedient human.

It's a tough read. The human arrogance is astounding. I'm embarrassed as a human every time I read it. Who are we, thinking we can arrest the eternal Word, thinking we can trip up the Genius behind the Universe with a word play, thinking we can make him do anything He's not on a path to do, thinking we can kill the author of Life. No, this is Jesus who willingly, obediently lays aside all the rights of being God and submits himself to our self important representatives. The one whose powerful words spoke the universe into being, says nothing as accusations are hurled. The Word is silent. The hands that flung stars into space nailed to a cross. Oh Lord Jesus. The humility. The love. The obedience to see this through. And make the way for our forgiveness possible.

I saw something new preparing this. John is known for recording the Jesus sayings of "I am the Way, the Truth, the Life" "I am the Resurrection" "I am the good shepherd". But for the first time reading the crucifixion I heard Jesus

death. He was responsible for breathing life into humans in the first place and now he has the power to give them new life. Lazarus was given a second chance at this life but because of His trust in Jesus he will one day have a new life in a new body on a new earth without end. Creation recreation. Creator. Recreator. The Word has spoken.

Again, what does that do to our prayer life? What hopeless case do we need life breathed into? Which relative, which friend do we want Jesus to call to spiritual life?

Have you ever had a “lightbulb moment”? Ever seen “the light?” We use the idea of light to mean clarity of thought ... some hidden truth suddenly revealed. The lights came on ... sudden understanding. In John 8:12 Jesus says “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”.

Jesus was bringing light into the world about His Father. Shining light on the most important issue of any day. Who is God and who are we. Jesus is the one who brings light to this opaque question. Following this quote, John writes a couple of chapters telling of the Pharisses’ confusion “who is this Jesus”, his disciples asking “who is this Jesus”, the unbelief of the Jewish leaders, people disputing who he is. And then John recounts Jesus healing the blind man. The light of the world gives the blind man sight. Here a man is given physical sight and then even more wonderfully given spiritual sight to see that Jesus is Lord. This was a sign (again, not just a miracle but a sign of something deeper) that Jesus could take the scales off our eyes and reveal saving truth to us. The physical healing pointing to the deeper truth that one day there will be perfect spiritual sight. When every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Perfect light. Perfect understanding.

But not everyone wants to see the light. Sadly, this is a big part of “The Story of Us” tomorrow. Jesus says in John 3:19 “light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil”.

“Leave me alone”. “Don’t shine your light on me. I’m OK”. The saddest moment of this Overture, the minor key, “though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.” He came to that which was his own: he made it, he owned it, he loved it, he sustained it but his own did not receive him. He was not welcome. And still he came to redeem it. To buy it back.

If that’s the lowpoint, the highpoint of our passage this morning is the stunning announcement that this Word, this eternal, creative, life giving, light shining God became flesh. And there would have been collective gasps from all sorts of places. What sort of God would do that? All those who were with John in the beginning have walked away now, shaking their heads at the absurdity of a God becoming human. How could God leave His glory and become wrapped in something as disgraceful as humanity? Who would do that? Jesus would do that. Jesus did that.

a sign of the great healing that is to come: when the whole of creation will be made new.

All of creation is at the creator's call. Jesus the creator from eternity is walking through the pages of John's gospel.

What does that pull from us? Astonishment, gratitude, comfort, boldness to pray? I hope all of the above.

This is such a good reminder to us, if we have slipped into casually chatting to Jesus in the morning. Asking him to help us with parking or to deal with whatever is annoying us ... let's stop and think that the one we are speaking to is from before the Beginning. He is the Creator. Yes, He is that big. Oh it's good to be awestruck every so often!

Third point but 4th verse: "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind."

Life and light are two of the big songs that John plays throughout his gospel. If you look up "life" and "light" in the bible concordance, which is the part at the back of a study bible that shows you where to find certain words: you'll see that John's gospel has 34 references to "life", way more than anywhere else in the bible and 10 references to "light", second only to the Psalms with 12. Perhaps I had too much time on my hands preparing this ... but the point is, that these two themes "light" and "life" run right through John.

When we hear "ahhhh, this is the life", we probably picture a banana lounge, a cocktail and a sunset but is it? Is it really?

Jesus says in John 10:10 "I have come that they (the sheep of his pasture, those in His care) might have life, and have it to the full" We 're not promised a life of banana lounges and cocktails, we're not even promised a life without struggle or hardship but we are promised a life supervised, protected, led and fed by a loving shepherd. A life in which we find purpose: living for the purpose for which we were made.

And to drive the point home that Jesus is life John is the only gospel to recount the story of Lazarus. Very quick recap on that from John 11: Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, dear friends of Jesus, is seriously unwell. They call for Jesus to make him better but Jesus waits. There is something even deeper to be done here. He waits and Lazarus dies. He is four days dead when Jesus arrives on the scene. That would be hopeless wouldn't it? We understand the heartbreaking question "why weren't you here Jesus?" that Martha asks but Jesus, eternal, creator, the bringer of life says (v23) "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die, and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Martha answers "yes, Lord I believe that you are the Messiah the son of God". (She is one of the first to understand who Jesus was). And Jesus walks to the opened tomb and calls out to the dead. He calls life back into Lazarus. In him was life. In him was power over

And small side bar here: some people think they are self made men or women. One day they'll know the truth.

And here's another reason to get excited about Jesus as creator.

Has anyone brought some handiwork along with them this weekend? What is it? What are you making? Whatever you are making is for a reason. To keep someone warm, to show someone you love them. How about cooking? If you make a meal for your friends or family, you do it to nourish them. If they threw the meal at the wall ... there would be great sadness on your part, because that was not the intention of your creation. And as the maker you would be right to feel sad about this. The three year old might think it's art on the wall and utterly hilarious but that wasn't the purpose.

What is the purpose of God's creation? To bring him glory.

When you're out walking the Hell's Gates and have that "oh my this is beautiful" moment: share it with Him. Tell Him you think it's beautiful. See a sunset that is stunning thank him for his creativity and kindness and order in creation. Let's make a point of some time this weekend stopping to marvel that He has made this world unnecessarily beautiful. Jo was musing the other day about how grateful she was that He didn't make (in her words) "a brown world". And I answered, "Why peacocks?" Because our God is a creative, God of beauty. All things were created for Him and through him (Col 1:16). We were created for Him. To delight in Him and to delight Him. He is our Creator, He is right to be sad when we miss our purpose. And fling ourselves against figurative walls, making a mess.

Time for a quick recap: Story of Jesus: eternal, creator.

If, as we suspect, that John is highlighting certain characteristics of Jesus to bring them up later ... where would we go in the rest of his book to see Jesus as creator?

In the beginning the Word called water into being. Jesus first miracle (which by the way John refers to as "signs" because they point to something deeper) so Jesus' first sign is to tell the water, sitting in large ceremonial washing jars at a wedding to become wine. And not just any wine. The best wine. Jesus is going to do things a new way now. This creator who once turned nothing into something is here on earth turning that something ordinary into something extraordinary.

And we all know that water can't be walked on. Unless you're the creator and have need for it to support you and a friend. John records legs that haven't worked in 38 years suddenly working at his command. Not ready for physio rehab for the next few years. At a word, the paralysed man got up and walked in John 5. This is the original creator at work, restoring his original creation. Reconnecting nerve cells, healing muscle fibres. This is a hint of what is to come,

When we say “she can make a meal out of nothing ... well, that’s just not true. There are raw materials in the fridge and in the cupboard that whoever she is has cleverly whipped into an acceptable meal.” That’s a talent for sure. But the creator of the universe had nothing but His words to work with. And that was all He needed. Out of nothing everything was made. Once there was nothing. Then something. Then everything. An in case we miss it, he writes “without him nothing was made that has been made”.

And here the Gnostic believers of the day would have excused themselves. They couldn’t conceive of a perfect spiritual God dealing in matter, getting His hands dirty with things physical. What could spiritual perfection possibly have to do with grubby tangibles? But John is emphatic ... God is a god of creation and Jesus is jointly responsible.

What is the first word that you think of when you think of the act of creation? Let me read Ps 33:6,9 as inspiration and then call out your word.

“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth ... for he spoke and it came to be, he commanded, and it stood forth.”

Unlimited Power? Creativity? Diversity? Genius?

Being reminded that He is the Creator is incredibly comforting and humbling. And it is always a timely reminder when I start to go down the “Do you know what you’re doing here God? Are you sure you’ve got this? Wouldn’t it be better if ... ” And the verses that I find most helpful are the ones that say: “were you there when I laid the foundations of the earth? Alison, where were you when I put the boundaries for the sea down? Did I need your help to hold back the seas? Or to give orders to the morning?”

How often do we consider the scale of our universe and then consider that He spoke that into being? Let’s do that. This is the awesome power of our God. He speaks and it happens. He speaks and life is formed.

Every act of creation since this moment ... every piece of art, every painting, every building, every new born baby is rearranging atoms and molecules that our God put together in the beginning. He understands the bonds that hold this world together because he made them. Even more than that. the bonds are holding together today because he sustains them. I am standing here because Jesus the sustainer of the universe is holding the Alison atoms together. And I’m grateful. This building is staying upright because the bonds which hold the bricks and struts as solids are obeying laws He set down. And I’m very grateful. That’s about all the physics and chemistry I can cope with. But I marvel even at the little I know. (I also marvel at how little I know but that’s a whole other story). This is worth our daily thanks to him for his genius and kindness. For calling this universe into being and sustaining it physically for millennia.

We know right from the opening that we just read that we are in unusual territory. John opens, not with Jesus family tree as Matthew does, not with the political census and historical setting of Luke, not with boom Jesus as a man, predicted by scripture being baptized by John and then tested by Satan as Mark does: but with the biggest backdrop imaginable. John goes waaaaay back.

He starts his story of Jesus in the beginning ... and with those words "In the beginning" every single one of his Jewish readers would immediately be back in Genesis (this opening words of the Old Testament). John writes his story of Jesus starting outside of known history, outside of known place, outside of this universe. Jesus' story is an eternal story. It has no beginning. In the beginning, there was no beginning. "There never was a time when he wasn't" thank you Athanasius (chief defender of the Christian faith in the fourth century).

Even people from other cultures of the time would have been engaged with this opening. The Greek Stoics held that God had a mind (logos) that he implanted within the universe so that it acted "logically" which they saw with the recurring daily sunrise/sunset, the seasons, orderly behavior of the universe. "In the beginning was logos" John is not offending listeners here. The Gnostics who believed that the spiritual world is good, but that all matter is evil also held a sense of "logos". And, Heraclitus (Greek philosopher from the 6th century BC) wrote about "the omnipresent wisdom by which all things are guided". Now I smiled when I read that quote and I thought "there is nothing new under the sun!". I don't know if you wander amongst people who think like this but I have lost count of the number of times people in my industry and in my world have said "Ask the universe" "Trust the universe to make things right" ... as if there is a great cosmic benevolence out there which guides all things. This is an ancient world view and John captures all these ideas in his use of "Logos". And invites everyone in ... to think a little deeper.

Now we are very aware that John is using "Logos" to describe Jesus. And most of us probably know what is coming. But for the original listeners, this is all still very acceptable philosophy.

But before we go any further let's stop and wonder why John chose to start his Story of Jesus "in the beginning"? Perhaps it's because he never wants us to forget the eternity of Jesus, he wants this to underscore everything that follows. Every story of grace and truth that will follow, every interchange that Jesus has on earth needs to be read and underpinned by the knowledge that this Jesus was with God in the beginning. This Jesus was God in the beginning. The baby in the food trough (God) the one telling the Pharisees off (God) the one who was dining with the outcasts of society (God), the one who will have his feet washed by tears and his back torn by a whip (God). The one who stumbles to the cross? John never wants us to forget that this is God from eternity. How I wish we could just stop here for an hour and ponder. But on we go.

This eternal "logos", this Word, this power who, still in verse 1, was with God and was God from the beginning is then described as the agency through which everything was made.

THE STORY OF JESUS, Alison Whalley
Anglican Women's Retreat
24 Feb. 2018

Have you ever had the wonderful experience of sitting in a theatre, waiting for a musical to start and the lights dim, the conductor walks out, we all applaud and the orchestra starts playing and your excitement just builds as you recognize snippets of the songs that they will be performing. You want to sing along but just as soon as one song starts it stops and they're on to another one. The overture is there to whet our appetite, warm us all up, to give us an idea of what is to follow.

It feels like this is just what John has done with the passage that we're about to read and hopefully is open before you. Welcome to the overture of John's Story of Jesus... John has got his orchestra out and he's giving snippets of what the big songs are that are coming up. And oh my, they are big songs. The concepts that are contained in this overture are as big as they come. But we're not going to let big concepts scare us. Because we are going to be talking about Jesus and it is my prayer that at the end of the weekend you will simply love Him even more than you do now.

So where are we heading? Today we are concentrating on John's story of Jesus: often summarized as "the Word became flesh". We'll look at five things that this passage highlights about him and a couple of times look at how that song is played later in the gospel. And then tomorrow we are going to look at the Story of Us, how as adopted children of God, our flesh can be used to take his words of love, hope and forgiveness to a desperately needy world.

The summary statement for the weekend is this: "we are invited to approach reverently within the walls of the Word of God, to gaze wonderingly and adoringly upon the glory of the everlasting Son made flesh then go forth to live for him amid the realities of our everyday world." Bruce Milne writing the commentary on John for *The Bible Speaks Today*.

We came, we read, we thought, we prayed, we fell in love all over again and then we went out and shared. I'm excited.

So let's pray before we approach the Word of God.

And now let's read together John 1: 1-18.

Tiniest bit of back story: John was written up to 50 years after Jesus death. John, a much loved disciple of Jesus, was the last of the four gospel writers to write his account of this extraordinary life. And it's as if he takes 50 years to reflect, to mull over, to wonder about all that he had seen and heard when he was with Jesus. Unlike the other three gospels, John doesn't attempt to tell the story chronologically. He's telling the story in a slightly different way to the others. John's gospel is a beautiful, poetic, reflective wonderful account of Jesus.