Westlake Church Lausanne

Power and Weakness: the Word became Flesh
John 1:1-18

In case you don't know, last Sunday was the first Sunday of Advent. But in Westlake, we're a bit slower than the rest of the world – and so today is the first Sunday of our Advent series, which we've called Power and Weakness, as we look at the birth of Jesus.

John 1:1-18

Wherever you're at in terms faith, Christmas can be a magical time of year, can't it? It's this combination of dark nights, and beautiful lights, of terrible sweaters, and feasting. It's as if at Christmas people experience something magical, something enchanting, that breaks into the mundane of the rest of the year.

But as John opens his gospel, he tells us that 2000 years ago something magical, something from out of this world, really did break into our mundane. Something so extraordinary happened in history that it really did join heaven and earth. And John tells us that all the wonder we experience at Christmas is really just an echo of this one astonishing event. As one writer puts it, John writes this opening to draw you into the 'story of all stories.' That all the stories that might be told at Christmas, stories of magic and wonder, stories of love triumphing over hate, are all pointing to this one, great story.

Christ is the Word
Listen again to how John begins Jesus' story: v1, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.'

Now, you may have heard those words many times, and whilst their beauty may have lost none of their appeal, they may not strike you as being out of this world. But for the people who first heard them, things would have been very different.

Think first about the Jewish people who first heard this. The Old Testament begins, Genesis 1:1, 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.' In the beginning, *God*. And now John writes: 'In the beginning *was the Word*.' So right off, if you were Jewish, John has linked this Word, in Greek this *logos,* to the God who created everything. And who created everything, light and life, by speaking them into being. And so, if you were Jewish, God's word was the powerful means by which God made everything. But from the rest of the Old Testament, it was also by his word that God delivered his people, and brought about judgement on his enemies.

And so, if you were a Jew hearing this for the first time, you'd be thinking, 'Are you trying to tell me that God's power of creation and rescue and justice are all rolled into one, in this man Jesus?'

And things were just as extraordinary for non-Jews, for people who had been shaped by Greek philosophy. Because for them the Word, the *logos*, was a philosophical idea. The Greek philosophers spoke of the *logos* as the divine order behind the cosmos. The *logos* was the universal, impersonal, governing principle behind everything. And so to people shaped by that world view, what John says here was also profoundly revolutionary, because that order, that governing principle, that *logos*, is not an abstract idea, or a principle at all – it's a person. And that very idea turned the world upside down.

You see, in his book, *A Brief History of Thought,* Luc Ferry, the French philosopher, makes the case that the reason Christianity presented such a challenge to the Roman world, and the Greek philosophy it was built on, was that with this very first sentence of John's, the power behind the universe was suddenly not unfeeling, or impersonal, or abstract, but a loving, personal God. And God's power is not some disembodied force, but a person. And so, in one sentence, *everything* becomes personal – the universe, eternity, salvation, power, rescue, justice, they all become intensely personal, and that meant that your life, as an individual, as a person, mattered, because God is intensely personal.

Because, after all, that is who John is saying that Jesus, this Word, is. Verse 1 again, 'In the *beginning* was the Word.' Now, imagine that you're a great media star, or world-strutting politician. It doesn't matter how great you think you are, it doesn't matter how narcissistic you've become, you could never say that about yourself, could you? I mean, however highly you think of yourself, there was a time when you weren't, when you didn't exist, when you weren't even a twinkle in your mother's eye. In fact it was a very long time. But John says there never was such a time for the Word. He always, ever has been.

But then John says, 'and the Word was *with* God.' Now, what does it mean to be *with* someone? If I were to say to you, 'I saw so and so today and I spent some time with him.' You'd say, well at least Martin has one friend! Because to be *with* someone implies that you have some kind of relationship *with* them, doesn't it. And so John's saying that this Word, this *logos*, is a Person in relationship with God.

And yet, you can be with someone for a long time and that relationship grow cold, can't you? I mean, I could tell you that I've been *with* Su for over 22 years, but are Su and I still in love, or do we barely talk? Do we still gaze into one another's eyes lovingly, or turn our backs in coldness? Well, the word John uses here for *with* also has this sense of being *towards* someone. And later John will call God, 'the Father' (v14, 18), and he'll call the Word, 'the Son' (v14), and so for all eternity these two different, distinct persons, the Father and the Son, have been *with* one another, *toward* one another, in face-to-face loving relationship with one another, for ever.

And that's why you and I can find loneliness so crushing. It's why we all need and enjoy friends we can share life with, and why life feels empty when we don't have that - because we've been made in the image of this God of loving community and relationship.

But then, John tells us, v1, 'and the Word *was* God.' So whilst this Word, this Son, is distinct from God the Father in his *person*, when it comes to his *nature*, to his essence, he is *God* the Son.

And as the immensity of that sinks in, John piles it on even more, v3: 'All things were made through him.' And just in case we don't get that, John says it a second time, negatively: v3, 'and without him was not any thing made that was made.' So this Word is *the* supreme creator. *And* he's the ultimate life-giver. Verse 4, 'In him was life, and the life was the light of man.' So he's the fountain of all physical and spiritual life. So if you ask yourself, 'where does life come from?' Where does my life come from?' John's answer is – from him.

Now have you ever experienced a moment of transcendence? Maybe you've listened to a piece of music, or you've looked out on some spectacular natural scene, or you've walked into some soaring cathedral, and your breath is taken away, and you feel lifted out of yourself, and you know deep down that there is something beyond yourself, that there is another realm beyond the physical. Well, John is saying that, ultimately, that spiritual light comes from the Word, and all those moments point back to him. And despite all our looking to science and technology to answer the deep questions of life, we cannot escape that 'sense of other', that knows intuitively there is more to life than this. As John says in v5, 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.'

Now, what do you do with all that? I mean, is what John writes here just high sounding, but ultimately speculative, philosophy? Well, maybe, if it wasn't that he roots it all in the events of the very first Christmas. Because the mind-blowing thing about what John writes is *who* he's writing about: A man whom he knew as a friend.

The Word Became a Man

Now, in his account of Jesus' birth, Matthew says, 'All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Immanuel" (which means, God with us)' (Matt 1:22-23).

And no other religion has anything like this, does it? Other religions say, if you do enough, or try hard enough, or are spiritual enough, you can climb the ladder to somehow be with God. But Christianity says something very different: that this supreme, creating, powerful, rescuing, just God, The Word, climbed *down* the ladder, and narrowed himself, and constricted himself, and was born as a

vulnerable, defenceless baby and laid in a manger, to be *with* us. It's why, in Charles Wesley's famous carol, *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing*, we sing, 'Veiled in flesh the godhead see. Hail the incarnate deity. Pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel.'

And that's the magic of Christmas. That Jesus is God with us. As John says in v14, 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'

But think about that word, *dwelt.* Because it was the word used for when someone pitched their tent. Now, John's not saying that Jesus is a fan of camping, and likes nothing better than getting out into the wild. It's that just as in the Old Testament, God dwelt among the Israelites in the tabernacle, the tent in the desert, so now, in Christ, God has come to live among us. But in the Tabernacle, no one could ever approach God. His glory dwelt in the Most Holy Place, and the people were shielded from his glory by a thick curtain. But now, John says, God's glory has been revealed in Jesus, for everyone to see: v14, 'And we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.'

Recently I sat opposite someone who has experienced very real pain and brokenness in his life and family. And he said to me that the thought that God would enter our world and take on our frailty and weakness, in all our vulnerability, and allow himself to be broken and endure pain, is incredible. And he said to me, if it wasn't true, it would *have* to be true. Because this is the God we all need. The God who's not distant, or untouched by my suffering, but one who understands my life as it really is, who has entered the darkness of my world.

And that's exactly what John says Jesus has done, v5, 'The light shines in the darkness'; v9: 'The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.'

Now, one of the things we enjoy as a family about Christmas are the lights. There are lights everywhere. And one of our traditions is to pick a night, and go and buy a load of chips/fries, and go and admire the lights – and decide who has the naffest, tackiest display and who has the best. But at the time of year when you look out of your window and think, 'man it's dark already and it's only 5 o'clock', those lights are welcome, aren't they – because they dispel something of the gloominess.

Well, in one of the most famous Christmas passages, Isaiah the prophet writes, 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone' (Is 9:2). Now, what was so dark about the time of Jesus' birth, that warranted Isaiah to say that? Well, there was international unrest; and civil discord over taxation; and refugees; and rulers who governed for their own gain. In other words, it was pretty much like ours.

But in the Bible, darkness is often used as a picture of sin, and spiritual blindness – of our lives separated from God, of us living in the dark, away from the light of his loving presence.

And it's into that darkness that God has shone his light. But look how he does it. Look what Isaiah says, 'on them has light shone'. So this is not a light from inside ourselves, is it? This is not a light whereby we can sort out our own problems by education, or politics, or science. It's a light from outside us. As John the Baptist's father sings in Luke's nativity account: 'the sunrise shall visit us from on high' (Luke 1:78).

But how does that sunrise, how does that new dawn break into our darkness? Well, listen to Isaiah again: 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' (Is 9:6). And the darkness begins to be dispelled as the Light of the World is born in the darkness and cold of a stable.

Now, how does the world respond to that? When the queen visits somewhere, flags get hung out and bands play. But there are no flags or celebrations for Jesus, are there? It's as if the Innkeeper's failure to find a room foreshadows everyone else's response. Look at v10-11, 'He was in the world, and world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.' And that's unspeakably tragic, isn't it? You see, maybe you look at the world and its suffering, and think, 'if there is a God he must be indifferent; he can't really care, or else he'd do something.' And yet John says it's the world that is indifferent to the God who has entered our world in all its suffering.

But ask yourself, if ultimately Christ's coming meant his rejection, at his birth and finally at the cross, why does he come at all? Why climb down the ladder for that?

Well, listen again to *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing*: 'Mild He lays His Glory by, Born that man no more may die; Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give them second birth.' That's why he's come.

That You Might Become a Child of God

Look at v12-13, 'But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.'

And here, the Christian gospel parts company with much of culture. You see, if you look at the world today, there are multiple examples of people dividing along ethnic lines, aren't there. And either literally, or metaphorically, we build walls

between us and them. And if you're one of us, you're in and if you're not, you're out. But John says, you're not in or out of the people of God on the basis of your ethnic identity or racial origin.

But neither, John says, is it on the basis of your own effort, your own willpower. And that's where the gospel differs from religion. You see much of spirituality says that you *can* save yourself, in fact you *must* save your self. That you've got to do this, or that, and redeem yourself. And if you do enough, you're in, and if not, you're out. But the message of Christmas, is that that you can't save yourself. You'll never be able to do enough.

But what you can't do, God does for you. And John says it's to those who receive Jesus – who welcome Christ as their Lord and as their light, as their ruler and as their saviour – who believe in him, and put their trust in him, it's to them that God opens the door to his family, and makes them his children. And the change that takes place when God does that in your life, is so dramatic that the only way the New Testament writers can describe ii is as if you've been born again – a totally new start. And that's why Christ was born a baby, that you might be reborn. That's why he came to be rejected, that you might be accepted.

And you can never earn that: it's a gift of God's grace. That's why John says in v16, 'For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.' So whilst God's law shows us his character, and his righteous requirements for life, that law could never save us, could it? By its very nature all it can do is bring home to us how far short of those standards we fall. So as JC Ryle said, whilst God's law is just, it could never justify. It could never declare us not guilty. Only God's grace to us, as he steps into our world, and perfectly keeps that law, and then takes our place at the cross, can declare us not guilty.

But it's not like you get Christmas, and a new start, but then it's back to the mundane, same old, of having to earn God's favour by trying your hardest. In Jesus it's grace upon grace upon grace, John says – an endless succession of grace. Grace for today, not just yesterday. You see, just think how you feel about yourself. If your sense of self-worth, or the assurance that God loves you and accepts you, are based on you doing enough or being good enough, you'll never feel good enough, or that you've done enough, will you? Or if you do, you'll feel proud. And if you're proud, then you'll become judgmental of others, who you think aren't as good as you. But grace makes you gracious. It changes the way you see yourself, you know you are more loved than you ever dared believe. But it also changes how you see others. And you know you're secure in your Heavenly Father's love, not because you're so good, but because Jesus is. And that means you can show grace to others because you know that you are as needy as they are.

And that's what makes Christmas so magical. That's why it seems that something from outside our world has broken in, because it has. Grace has broken in. The Word of God has taken on flesh and dwelt among us, and life can never be the same.