The Paradox of Christmas
John 1:1-14

Advent does not begin officially until next Sunday, but we're going to get a head start… for a reason. You see, in our family we've had a rule. And that is, that you're not allowed to talk about Christmas until after November the 5th - which in the UK is Fireworks Night. Because, if we didn't have that rule, our girls would be singing Christmas carols in July. And that's because, as a family, we love Christmas. Which is surprising, because I became a Christian when I was 17, in November. And I had no previous church background, so by the time I found my way to a church, Advent had begun. And I have two abiding memories of that first Advent as a Christian.

The first was hearing the Advent carol, *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*, for the very first time, and being blown away by they beauty of the music and the truths of God keeping his promises.

But the second was to hear the minister stand up and talk about all the reasons he *didn't* like Christmas. That it was pagan and commercialised, and had nothing to do with Christ, and was an excuse for over-eating and over-drinking.

And I was sat there as a brand-new Christian, thinking, 'sure, but what we've just sung, what I've just come to believe, surely Christmas is wonderful!'

And my prayer for you this Advent is that something of that wonder would break upon your heart. And to help, in all our various services leading up to Christmas, we're going to look and see how in the coming of Christ, God has kept his promises: his promise to Eve, and to Abraham, to David and to Micah; and finally to Isaiah.

But this morning, I want you to think the unthinkable, to consider the Paradox of Christmas - that what could not possibly be true has come true. That the Word Became Flesh; The Almighty Became Weak; The Rich Became Poor; and the King Became Servant of All.

The Word Became Flesh
Look at John 1:1: 'In the beginning was the Word.' And it would have been difficult for John to have written a more loaded statement. Because to the Greeks, *the Word*, *logos*, could simply mean a word or a message, but to anyone with the smallest smattering of philosophical knowledge it was a loaded term. Because *the logos* was the rational principle, the impersonal fundamental basis of life, the universe and everything.

It would be like a philosopher today saying, 'In the beginning was Reason. Or someone on campus saying, 'In the beginning was Science'. In the beginning was what we consider the basis of everything.

But his Jewish readers would have read, *the Word, logos*, very differently, because in the Old Testament, 'the word' was God's power in creation. In Genesis 1, God spoke the word and the stars span into place, and plants and trees erupted from the ground, and birds flew, and dolphins leapt in the waves. But it was also through his Word that God set his people free from slavery and spoke to them through the prophets.

So whatever your ethnic background, when John's first readers read this they would have been thinking, I know what he's talking about.

And that Word, John says was 'In the beginning…' and he's riffing off Genesis 1:1, '*In the beginning*, God created the heavens and the earth.' So, in the beginning, before anything else existed, the Word *was*. That means there was not a day, not an hour, not a second, when the Word was not. Before time began, the Word *was*.

But then look what John says, v1 again, 'And the Word was *with* God.' And to be *with* someone implies a relationship, doesn't it. I mean, imagine a young couple and someone tells you they're spending time with each other, you know what that means, don't you. They are making each other and their relationship the focus of their attention, they're turning towards each other. And John is saying, the Word was *with* God. From before time began they have been focused on each other.

Which tells you something else as well. Because to be with someone just naturally implies you're a different person from that someone. Now, sure, I could tell you, 'I'm a bit peopled out, I need to spend some time with myself', and you wouldn't go 'why does Martin think he's two different people?' You'd just go 'oh he's such an introvert.' But to say that 'Jack was with Jill' tells you Jack and Jill are not the same person. And here is John saying, 'and the Word was *with* God' - that from all eternity, the Word and God are two distinct persons, turned toward each other, enjoying one another.

Which would be extraordinary enough if it weren't for what John says next: v1 again, 'and the Word *was* God.' The Word, eternally existing with God, delighting in God, yet a separate person from God, is God himself. What is that? That is part of the mystery of the Trinity, that the Word, the Second Person of the Trinity is, in the words of the Creed, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God. Begotten not made. Of one substance with the Father.

But then John sets off an earthquake, v14, 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'

Now, in Greco-Roman culture, people lived with a dualistic sense of body and spirit. Like a young lady I was talking to not so long ago who said she was 'a spirit trapped in a body' they thought of the spirit as good, but the body, the physical, as bad. It was like a prison. So to them it would have been inconceivable that the eternal Word, the very essence of being, would become flesh. Because he doesn't say he became a man, they had lots of gods in their mythologies that became men. He says, he became *flesh*.

Think how shocking that is. I mean you've heard this called the i*ncarnation*. But you've also heard of *chili con carne*. Chili with meat. And the Word doesn't just become a man, he becomes meat. He becomes flesh. The one who always was, and was with God, and was God, becomes as much a human being as you and I ever are.

Now, like every other king in the ancient world, King Solomon wanted to build a temple for God. Except, maybe unlike them, he knew what he was doing, because he knew that nothing could contain the true God. Because how could something so limited as a temple ever contain the limitless. How could finite space, with walls, ever contain the infinite? It's why Solomon prays at the inauguration of the temple: "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27).

So how does this eternal, infinite, limitless Word become flesh? Does he take on the body of a fully grown warrior hero? Something that matches, in human terms, his glory? No. An angel comes to

Mary, a young virgin, and says, “Do not be afraid, Mary… you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” (Luke 1:30-31).

And so the one who created all things enters his creation, and the limitless is limited and contained, not in a vast and beautiful temple, but in an embryo, in his mother’s womb.

And he who was before all time entered time. And when he was born, the One who the highest heavens cannot contain was wrapped in cloths and contained in a manger. It’s no wonder that the Magi, who knew something of what was up, when they found Jesus, ‘Fell down and worshipped him’ (Matt 2:11). Because when you know that the manger contains the uncontainable, what else can you do but worship?

And yet, our current culture tells you to worship yourself. To make yourself, your feelings, emotions, desires your God and authority. And everyone else needs to bow down to them. And it promises that if you live like that you’ll be happy. But in reality, depression, anxiety, loneliness and medication use are all going up. Why? Because you cannot bear the weight of being God, because you’re not God. But the Word made flesh is. And you need something and someone greater than yourself to worship, and this baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger, is it.

You see, why does the Word become flesh?

Well, look at v14 again, ‘And the Word became flesh *and dwelt among us*.’ Literally, pitched his tent among us. Because before Solomon built his temple, God dwelt among the people in the Tent, the Tabernacle of Meeting. And the glory of God once descended on that tent and on the temple in cloud and fire. But now, John says, God has come down, not in smoke and fire, but as one of us.

Listen to what the writer to the Hebrews says, ‘Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature’ (Heb 1:1-3).

Now, maybe you would say, ‘I feel closest to God out in nature. Give me a day in the mountains and it just does something for me.’ And you’re right. God has revealed himself through his creation. Or maybe you’re turned on by the life of the mind, and for you, whether in science or the arts, trying to think God’s thoughts after him is what does it for you. And you’re right - Proverbs tells us it is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings to seek them out. Or maybe you’re more intuitive, more of ‘a feeler’ than that and you sense the spiritual much more than you can verbalise it. And again, there is a supernatural to be sensed.

But when God wants you to know him, and find him, and enjoy him, he doesn’t send you a mountain to gaze on, or scientific concepts to explore, or even a feeling to be had. He sends you His Son.

Because if the Word was and is a person, then you too can be in relationship with him. And Augustine wrote, ‘he was born that we might be reborn.’ Because when you know him, nothing can ever be the same again. And the burden of having to be your own god is lifted off you, And however great your experiences of nature, or knowledge of science, or feelings of spirituality are, nothing, John says, compares to what you can experience and know and feel, when you know the Word made flesh.

The Almighty Became Weak

Now we are used in our day to politicians making grandiose boasts about themselves. But those boasts are nothing compared to the claims the New Testament writers make about Jesus. John says in v3 that 'All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.' Paul writes, 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.' (Col 1:15-17). And the writer to the Hebrews says, 'he is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power' (Heb 1:3).

So they're saying that every star in every galaxy; every leaf on every tree; every wave on every ocean and every tiny plankton jiggling in every ocean; every atom and every force exists because Jesus told them to exist. And it's him who holds them all together.

Think about that. That means that all the combined power of the universe, tapped and untapped, natural and supernatural, is but a falling feather in the storm force winds of his power.

And yet, the One who holds the universe together was knit together in his mother's womb. And the One who holds all things in his hands was held in her arms. And the One who took the dust of the earth and breathed on it to create Man became a man of dust.

Why? Well, listen to Psalm 103, 'As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. *For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust*.'

Now, when you're going through something tough, it's great to have someone come alongside and empathise with you. But the hard truth is that even when that someone cares for you deeply their words can sound a bit hollow, because they haven't really experienced what you're experiencing. But when they have, when they *really* know what you're going through, because they've been there, then far from sounding hollow, their words resonate with meaning.

You see, there is some degree of comfort in knowing that your Creator knows and understands you. But how much greater is that comfort when you know that he *really* knows, because he's walked where you walk.

You see, if you look at Psalm 103, when the psalmist says that God knows that we are dust, he's talking about our sin, and our repeated failures to stand up under temptation, yet, because he knows what we're like, he's merciful towards us.

But then listen to what the writer to the Hebrews says of Jesus: 'We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (Heb 4:15-16).

And so Jesus, the Almighty, became weak, he became a man of dust, subject to temptation, that he might conquer every temptation. Think of your temptation to fear and worry, or to power and glory. Think of your temptation to get your own back or push yourself forward. Think of your temptation

to look at what you shouldn't and not to look at what you should. Jesus faced all of those. But where we fail he conquered. And as we put our trust in him and not in ourselves, his victory becomes ours. He became weak that we might become strong. Strengthened with his grace to stand strong and his mercy when we fail.

The Rich Became Poor

Now, Su will tell you that I live under the delusion that I am still 25. But that was rudely broken last week when we were invited to a meeting with our bank to discuss my retirement. And I was sat there thinking, in fact I actually said to our advisor, 'what am I doing here, I feel like I'm 25!'

But part of what they wanted was a list of all our financial resources and investments. Let's just say it didn't take long.

But imagine trying to draw up a list of Christ's riches. Where would you begin… or end? In v4 John says, 'In him was life' - which means he is the wellspring of all life. In v9, he says Christ is 'The true light, which gives light to everyone' - so he sees and knows all things, and all true knowledge comes from him.

Now, maybe it's possible to estimate and quantify the total power of the sun. But how do you put a value on the infinite life and the light of Christ?

It's why John says in v14, 'And we have seen his *glory*, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.' Because glory carries this sense of weight - of immeasurable value. And Christ is full of it.

And yet, in the words of the song we've just sung, He who was rich beyond all splendour, all for love's sake became poor. And Martin Luther wrote, 'When Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, they were the most insignificant and despised… No one knew or was conscious of what God was doing in that stable.'

You see, Luther points out that Christ didn't come to the wealthy houses or rich apartments of Rome. Those places were filled with the wealth of the world. But when the glory of heaven became flesh, those houses and apartments stood empty and hollow compared to the glory that filled a poor virgin's womb and a manger in a stable.

Why come so low? Well, Paul tells us: 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9). So he was considered of no value that you might know your true value. He emptied himself that you might be filled. Filled with the riches of his Spirit and the riches of his grace, and the riches of his inheritance for you. He was shut out, so that you might be brought in. He found no room that a room might be prepared for you.

The King Became the Servant of All

When Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane, one of his disciples went on the attack with a sword. What follows is telling, because Jesus says, "Put your sword back in its place… Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt 26:52-53).

A few hours later, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor and representative of the most powerful king in the world, asks Jesus “Are you the king of the Jews?” To which Jesus replies, “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36). In other words, Jesus is a king more powerful and glorious than Pilate could ever comprehend. A king with thousands upon thousands of angels at his disposal, just one of which - if it was to appear - would make Pilate drop dead with fear.

And yet, this King of Glory allows himself to be tried and then executed on a cross, the penalty reserved for scum and for slaves, by a mere representative of a human king.

Why?

Well, in Philippians 2, Paul tells us: ‘Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking *the form of a servant*, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.’ (Phil 2:6-7).

So the King of Kings humbled himself that he might become your servant. The Commander of myriad, myriad angel armies took the lowest place so that you might be lifted high. And at the cross all our sin and unworthiness was counted to him, and like a servant he carried it, so that all his righteousness might be counted to us.

When I was an undergrad, a group of us friends bundled into a car and drove up for a hiking weekend in the north of England just before Christmas. And we were staying in a small village and on the Sunday morning we went to the local methodist chapel and practically doubled the size of the congregation. But I can still remember what the old preacher said, because it felt like he pointed all us young students out, and said ‘you cannot bow at the cross of Christ until you have first bowed at the cradle of Christ.’

Now, I know you can quibble with his theology, but there’s something about that that’s right.

You and I will never fully grasp what’s going on at the cross until we grasp the depth of what’s going on in the stable and the manger. That the Word was made flesh, that the Almighty become weak, that the Rich become poor, so that the King might become servant of all.

In Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge goes from being a rich, proud miser, grasping, clutching and covetous of every penny, to one who by the end is dispensing gifts and food parcels to the poor. Why? Because he was converted by Christmas, by the one who became poor that we might become rich.

Understand that, Paul says, and it’ll humble you, and you’ll willingly serve others because the King has served you. And you’ll be generous because he has been infinitely generous to you. And you’ll worship him, because you have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.