

Truth Born

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 24th of December 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Truth Born and is from John chapter 1 verses 1 to 18.

A long, long time ago, about last Friday, well so wrote A.A. Milne at some point of the Winnie the Pooh stories, young kids struggle to come to grips with dimensions of time and the vastness of time.

And one of the reasons why we find that sort of line funny is because it contrasts and juxtaposes the shortness and the length. A long, long time ago, about last Friday.

It's like when children ask you, or somebody you know, Grandpa, were you alive when the dinosaurs were on the earth? I'm not sure whether you answer honestly or not to that sort of question.

Or how far back can you go? Were you there in the really old days? Maybe they'll ask you even further than that.

[1 : 27] Where did God come from? Trying to push the dimensions of time as far as it would go. It's the same sort of thing with space.

Pushing the dimensions as far as you can go when you're a child. No doubt many of you, like me, at some point doodling in one of your primary school classes would write your address.

Paul Barker, 12 Robert Street, Chadston, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, the Southern Hemisphere, the world, the universe.

Clever people unlike me could maybe add one or two lines beyond that. But trying to push the dimensions as far as you can go. I remember as a child lying in bed, trying to imagine things before the beginning of time.

And trying to imagine things beyond the realms of space. I don't think I got very far in my imaginations. The Gospel of John pushes the boundaries or the edges of time and space for Jesus to their limit.

[2 : 37] Jesus doesn't begin in the Gospel of John in a shed, back lane, Bethlehem, Judea, Palestine, Northern Hemisphere, Middle East sort of thing.

But rather begins with the universe. And he doesn't begin in 6 BC, when Quirinius was governor. He begins in the beginning.

The absolute beginning. John is saying in the opening words that we heard just read, this is the very beginning. There was nothing before it. In the beginning was the word.

John is saying there that there was never a time when Jesus did not exist. He's not saying there was never a time when he didn't exist as a human being.

He makes that clear in verse 14. That Jesus became a human being 2000 years ago. But even before that, before Bethlehem, Jesus existed.

[3 : 48] With God. As God. He was there in the beginning. For Jesus, there was no beginning. He's always been there.

I remember one of my secondary school teachers saying, with some sarcasm, I think, at times, in the end, you've got to say that at the beginning, there was either something or God.

And I'll bank on God, he said. And I think I do too. I think even rationally, it makes more sense to think that at the very beginning, God was there.

Not a bit of dust particles floating around the universe, but much more likely God. John is saying that. John is saying that. In the beginning, God was there.

And as part of that God, if you excuse that expression, Jesus was there too. That dimension's easy to forget at Christmas, when we concentrate on Bethlehem and shepherds and wise men and animals and so on, we think that Jesus began 2,000 years ago.

[5 : 05] And this year, above all years, of course, we have that limited dimension to our thinking. The new millennium about to start, it's 2,000 years since Jesus' birth, although they've got the date wrong, it's about 2,006 years, but who cares, it's an excuse for a party.

But Jesus didn't begin at Bethlehem. Christmas is marking Jesus' beginning of human life, when he became flesh, to use John's expression in the reading we've heard.

But he already existed in heaven with God. And John makes it clear he was divine. There's no escaping that in these opening words.

And even though Jehovah's Witnesses will falsely translate them and interpret them, there is no way we can escape the fact that these words tell us that Jesus Christ is God to be worshipped. In the beginning was the Word. That's Jesus. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

[6 : 20] All things came into being through him. And without him, not one thing came into being that has come into being. John declares his hand straight away.

His gospel is not like a mystery that he's asking the question, who is Jesus? And keeps raising the question as people ponder it, like Mark's gospel.

John makes it clear from the very first sentence that Jesus, about whom he is writing this book, is divine, is God, and is to be worshipped.

And appropriately, the climax of this gospel of John is when one of his doubting disciples declares with complete unambiguity, you are my Lord and my God.

And he worships him. The question needs to be asked, why does John begin like this? It's lovely poetry.

[7 : 23] If you were home a few hours ago, you would have heard Prince Charles read this at St Paul's Cathedral in London. And no doubt you've heard many people read these words over the years, and maybe even being somewhat entranced by their poetic majesty.

But that's not why John wrote these words. Why didn't he start in Bethlehem, like Matthew and Luke do, in effect?

Or why not even start when Jesus was an adult, as Mark's gospel does? John's opening words of his gospel are deliberate.

They are deliberately echoing the opening words of the whole Bible, as we heard in the first reading tonight. John is wanting his readers to think in terms of God creating the universe.

And the themes and words of these opening words are all there in Genesis chapter 1. God's word at work.

[8 : 28] God's word creating. God's word being powerful. The themes of life and darkness and light in juxtaposition and contrast. The theme also in Genesis 1 and 2 of God being with the humanity that he has made.

John says the word became flesh and lived among us. And there are echoes there of the opening chapters of Genesis when God is with the human beings that he's made, living with them in the Garden of Eden.

Why does John go back to that? Why does he deliberately create those echoes of the original creation?

Because that original creation didn't last for long in a good state. You only need to read the third chapter of the Bible to see that. Death and expulsion from God's presence were the result.

But John is here saying that the old creation is being renewed or restored or reinvigorated through the coming of the word Jesus Christ.

[9 : 41] Jesus is the powerful, life-giving word. Just as God is created in the opening words of the Bible, so now in Jesus is God doing some new work of creation.

And just as God was the life-giver in the opening words of the Bible to the whole of the universe, so now John is declaring that in Jesus is the source of real life.

Not only that, the first thing that God created was light, and here we find in verse 4 and 5 that in Jesus was life and the life was the light of all people.

Deliberately echoing those opening words of creation. John is saying here that Jesus, and this is an extraordinary claim to make about a person, Jesus alone is the creator of life.

He is the source of life. But not just life as it is originally created, life as it's meant to be, a life that is perfect and good and a life in harmony with God.

[10 : 52] Jesus, John is writing here, is the way to life as God intended. He's the revealer of such life. That's what it means for him to be light. And he is powerful enough to create such life for us as well.

God is acting in Jesus Christ, becoming a human being, in order to restore this creation and bring it its real life. The old creation suffered through evil and failure, what the Bible calls sin, sometimes described in terms of darkness.

John says, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. It's a strange past tense.

He doesn't say in the darkness will not overcome it or does not overcome it. The darkness did not overcome it. Because John is referring to when Jesus died.

Then, the forces of darkness rallied against God's light and did not prevail. That's where John's gospel's headed, but he's already told us that here in these opening words.

[12 : 18] John is saying that the problems of the old creation, the problems of the world, even as we know it, are resolved in Jesus Christ.

Life as God meant it to be is found in him alone and in his death. Life is something our world prizes. When we hear of catastrophes in the world, they are measured by loss of life. The flood in Venezuela, we're not told how many gallons of water were poured across the shanty towns of Venezuela.

What we're told are how many people have lost their lives. When a plane crashes at Stansted Airport in England, we're not really told about how much metal was involved or how much petrol leaked out.

We're told about how many people's lives were lost. When there are car crashes, it's the same thing. We're concerned with life.

[13 : 23] We're concerned with preserving it, counting it, and keeping people alive. And dollars are poured into medicine for that purpose as well, to prolong life.

And yet, by and large, the world, then as now, ignores the best things of life and the source of those things.

that is, Jesus Christ. And there's nothing new in that in our day and age either because John is making that clear in these words as well.

He says, the word was in the world and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him.

Those words are almost scandalous. They're meant to create a sense of shame that the source of the best life possible is being ignored and rejected today as then.

[14 : 38] But John is writing his gospel so that the readers, you and I, 2,000 years later, will not reject that source of life but rather receive it and believe in it.

So he goes on to say, but to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God who were born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

How may you have the life that Jesus came to bring? By receiving him and believing in his name. That's the only way.

It's not by being a human being because John makes it clear the life is received not by being born as a human being but rather through an act of God as we receive him and believe in his name.

That's God's gift through Jesus. It's not our achievement. The opening words that we've heard read tonight are a bit like a Whitman's sampler.

[15 : 54] You know those tiny little boxes of chocolates. There's never enough, are there? You take one and think, oh, that was rather nice. I don't think anyone's looking. I'll have another one. There are only four in the box and you finish them and you can easily hide the box so nobody notices that you've eaten them.

You want more. That's the idea of the Whitman's sampler box is that you taste just a little, hmm, like Oliver Twist. Can I have some more?

That's what these verses are like here in John's Gospel. He's sounding the themes of the Gospel so that we might say, yes, I want more of this life.

I want to know more about this source of life. I want to know more about how I can receive it and how I can enjoy it to its full. John lays all his cards on the table in these opening words.

He's telling us who Jesus is. God, to be worshipped. No surprises there. No hidden things there. He's very upfront about it.

[17:00] He's saying what Jesus offers. Life in its fullness. Life in abundance. The life that God intends you and I to live. He also alerts us to the shocking path of rejection.

It's scandal and shame. A path that leads inevitably and inexorably to the cross. But there on the cross is where darkness did not prevail.

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness did not overcome it. And then, of course, be on the cross to the great glory of the resurrection, where life is seen for all.

And throughout John's Gospel, there are glimpses of how to receive him and believe in his name. Charles Wesley, the hymn writer, put it together in well-known words.

Light and life to all he brings. Risen with healing in his wings. Maybe these words, familiar, I'm sure, and yet profound, maybe they've whetted your appetite just a little to have some more.

[18:20] Don't be afraid. No cholesterol problem. And you don't have to check the scales in the morning. Read on. Read on in John to see what he's elaborating on and filling out by way of explanation of these opening words.

If you don't have a modern English version, well, we've got some tonight. And on your way out, just say, I'd like a John's Gospel, and Phil or I will give you one. And here at Holy Trinity, starting on the first Sunday of the new year, our sermons morning and evening to Easter will be through this Gospel.

Let me encourage you this Christmas to make sure that you've received him and believed in his name. The gift of life that God has to offer through Jesus is only found in Jesus, but is so good that you don't want to go home without it.

Make sure that it's yours. Make sure that you've received him. Let's pray. O God, we thank you tonight above all for Jesus Christ, for the life that he has to offer us through his death and resurrection, a life that is perfect, a life that is in harmony with you, a life that lasts beyond the grave.

Help us to receive him, to believe in his name, and so receive that life this Christmas. Amen.