

Life

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] Please be seated. Well, let's pray as we hear from God's Word.

Heavenly Father, speak to us now from your Word, we pray, that we may not only believe it and understand it, but live in response to it, full of faith and confidence in you and your Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen. Well, it's really Christmas. I mean that in two ways. One is, Christmas began sort of about two months ago with decorations in the shops and music and all those sorts of things.

But now, finally today, it's really Christmas Day. But I mean it in another and more significant way as well. That is, Christmas is real.

It's not magic, although periodically we keep seeing signs, the magic of Christmas. It's not fantasy. So it's not in the same realm as the Narnia stories or the Wind in the Willows or the Lord of the Rings and so on.

[1 : 14] It's not a myth. That is, an old fable or legend like some of the great Greek myths and battles and so on. It's not make-believe.

Nor is it spirit, as though somehow the essence of Christianity or the essence of Christmas is some spirit of peace or goodwill. Christmas is real.

It's solid, substantial, historically real. Dinkum, not bunkum. And at Christmas we celebrate and with some wonder and astonishment that the God who is spirit, the God who is eternal, the God who is other, the God who inhabits heaven, the God who is unseen, becomes seen and heard and tangible, incarnate human being, real person.

That's the thrust of these opening verses from the first of the Bible readings, the first letter of John. John was one of the 12 disciples or apostles of Jesus, the writer of the Gospel of John, the beloved disciple he's called, one of the inner group, in fact, of the 12 disciples who followed Jesus around for the last three years or so of his adult ministry before the crucifixion and resurrection.

John was there. And that's the thrust of what he's saying in these opening verses. We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands concerning the word of life.

[3 : 06] That is, we declare to you what was from the beginning, not what was from the beginning of his own experience as a follower of Jesus, but what was eternal, what was always there.

That is, he's declaring something about God who was there in the very beginning before the creation of the world. That's what he's speaking about. He's speaking about the eternal from the beginning, the sovereign God of heaven, the unseen spirit Lord of the universe.

But what he then says is a bit shocking or jarring in a way. What was from the beginning, before the world was made, we've seen and heard and even touched, he says.

It's real. It's tangible. We've heard that which was from the beginning, that is, speak, words. We've seen, we've looked at, gazed upon it or him, and we've touched him.

Maybe John remembers those words Jesus spoke in the upper room after the resurrection. Here are my wounds. Touch me, Thomas, and believe.

[4 : 24] It's real. Tangible. You see, it's more than a message. The end of verse one says it's concerning the word of life as though what John is speaking about is just a message, a proclamation, a gospel.

But the language is more than that. Yes, you might hear a message, but see it, touch it. See, what John is doing here is putting together, in a sense, the message and the content of the message, that is, Jesus himself.

For the heart of the Christian faith, the heart of the Christian message and gospel is Jesus the person. And that's what he's speaking about in these opening verses.

In John's day, like in our own, there were many who doubted the reality of Jesus. For some, they recognized that this person, Jesus, had lived, but claimed he was not really divine.

Just a sort of guru-type figure that people followed. For others, that he wasn't really human. There was like an apparition or a bit like a ghost or something like that.

[5 : 39] Not so, says John. He's from the beginning. He is, therefore, divine part of God. But we've seen, heard, and touched him.

That is, he's real. He's really human. Fully God has become fully human. And John reiterates this in the next verse, in verse 2.

This life was revealed, we've seen it, and testified to it, and declared to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us. And just in case we miss the point, he says it again, in effect, in verse 3.

We declare to you what we've seen and heard. All the way through these opening verses, the introduction or overture to this little letter, he's making it very clear, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that what was from the beginning, the Lord of the universe, has become really human.

Heard, seen, and touched. And John is saying, I have touched him. I've seen him. I've heard him. I was there. When he says, we've seen him and heard him, he's not including the readers, mostly, but rather referring to himself and other followers of Jesus from some generations before.

[7 : 02] Tradition has it this letter was written in perhaps John's older age, maybe something like 40, 50 years after Jesus had lived and died and risen from the dead, writing to people who never knew him personally, had never seen Jesus or heard Jesus visibly, audibly speak, never touched him.

And now perhaps because of that gap of a generation and probably a gap of distance, these people are probably elsewhere in the Roman Empire, in Asia Minor or somewhere like that, trying to bridge the gap for them.

They're doubting the reality of Jesus as though it's a made-up story, a myth or a fable or something like that. Not so, says John. It's real. He was real.

Really human, but at the same time really divine. John is saying then that the Christian faith and what we celebrate at Christmas is not fantasy.

It's not just a philosophy of an idea. It's not a fiction. It's not a myth. Christianity, you see, is not summed up by some good principle, peace and goodwill.

[8 : 15] Though that's a central ingredient to it. In the end, the essence, if it's all boiled down to it, in the Christian faith and in Christmas, of course, is a person.

Jesus Christ. That's what John's on about. That's what the Bible's on about. That's what Christians are on about. We're on about Jesus firstly and foremostly.

And it's grounded in historical reality, John is saying. That is, it's not just a made-up philosophy in order to make people better people. It's grounded in real, historical, tangible facts that have been eyewitnessed by John amongst other people.

They've seen Jesus, they've heard him, they've touched him. And no other religion apart from Judaism is so grounded in history as the Christian faith. That is, other religions have got historical beginnings with leader figures, Muhammad and Buddha and Confucius and so on.

But the essence of what they're on about is not as centrally grounded in historical truths and facts and events as it is the case for the Christian faith as well as for Judaism.

[9 : 32] You see, Christianity is more than just an idea of love or good works or peace. It's truth grounded in fact and grounded in a person, more than a person, fully human and fully divine.

That which was from the beginning whom we've seen and heard and touched. One of the key themes that Jesus was on about is the theme of life.

We see that emphasis in these words as well. John says in verse 1, And we declare to you that which was from the beginning which we've seen and heard and touched concerning the word of life.

And concerning the word of life sounds like the message and it is, but the word of life is also the person, Jesus Christ. Notice how he's described as the word of life.

For life in a sense sums up what Jesus was on about. Verse 2 goes on to say, this life was revealed. That is made evident for us.

[10 : 38] The life of Jesus in heaven unseen is revealed and made visible, made seen or seeable, I suppose, by human beings when he was born in Bethlehem and lived as a human being on earth.

And so John says at the end of verse 2, we declare to you the eternal life. The heart of the Christian faith is a person, Jesus. And in a sense, the heart of what he was on about is to bring life.

Not just physical life. Not just keeping life going on earth. Not just trying to prolong our days here on this earth.

Jesus is not on about physical birth and we could forget in a sense the essence of what he's on about when at Christmas we think of physical birth and the little baby in Bethlehem.

It's far more about life than that. Rather, it's life that is in fellowship with God. This passage goes on in verse 3 to say, we declare this life to you so that you also may have fellowship with us and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

[12 : 01] You see, the life that Jesus is on about is a life that is in fellowship with God. A life that is in relationship with God we might say. A life that knows God.

The God who is unseen in heaven we can relate to, we can have fellowship to, we can be friends of him because of Jesus Christ coming to earth and becoming fully human.

Living, dying, and rising from the dead. And think too of the emphasis in so much of Jesus' teaching about life. I've come to give you life and life in all its fullness.

I'm the bread of life. I'm the way, the truth, and the life. I'm the resurrection and the life. Life is such a recurring and dominant theme in Jesus' teaching.

More than physical life on earth. A life that is in relationship or fellowship with God the Father in heaven. A life that is eternal.

[13 : 04] See, there are plenty of people who enjoy physical life on earth and maybe really enjoy it, have a good life, a rich and fulfilling life in a way. But they lack fellowship with God.

They lack real life. They lack spiritual life. And in the end, it's that life that lasts for eternity and is the richest and fullest expression of life there is or can be.

Jesus came to bring people into fellowship with God and thus to experience the fullness and richness of life as God intended it to be.

To bring us to eternal life. As this passage says in verse 2, we declare to you the eternal life. Not just life that goes on and on and on but life that yes lasts for eternity but lasts in perfection, in fullness of joy and in intimacy of fellowship with God the Heavenly Father.

That's what Jesus came to do and only Jesus makes that life possible. no other way to the Father except through Him.

[14 : 21] You see, the only way that you or I will ever find eternal life is through the life revealed to us incarnate in Jesus Christ.

not that we can see Him today. He's not going to walk in the door. Not that we can touch Him today or shake His hand on the way out of church.

He's not here of course in that physical sense. Not that we can hear Him audibly speak as John and the other apostles and disciples had. But you see, such personal experience of Jesus is non-essential.

It's what the apostles experienced but after the resurrection of Jesus approximately 30 AD, no longer is there the physical incarnate Jesus on earth anymore for us to see or hear or touch.

But that doesn't matter. We don't need that personal experience to have fellowship with God the Father. John had it. Other disciples had it.

[15 : 27] But John says at the end of this first paragraph, we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. Having just said, we're telling you this, declaring this to you so that you may have fellowship with God the Father.

That is, through the testimony of what is written in this letter by John in the rest of the New Testament about Jesus, the word of life, we too can come into fellowship with God the Father.

We too can have a relationship that lasts for eternity with God. We too can receive eternal life. Not by shaking Jesus' hand and touching him, not by hearing his words audibly, not by seeing him physically, but by receiving Jesus through the words of testimony about him, especially in the New Testament part of the Bible.

We don't need to have been there, nor do we need Jesus to reappear for us to be able to have fellowship with God the Father. Jesus' first coming 2,000 years ago is sufficient for us here today to have fellowship with God the Father via the word of testimony in the scriptures of the New Testament of the Bible.

We come to life, life eternal, life in all its fullness through the life incarnate in Jesus, through the living word of the scriptures, not through mystical technique, not through moral rectitude, not through religious piety, not through meditation, not through some spiritual exercise or discipline, simply and only through faith and trust in Jesus Christ, God's son.

[17 : 17] There was an article in The Age yesterday, Alan Atwood was writing an opinion column, and he had noticed that he had no Christmas cards with a baby Jesus on them.

He had reindeer and Santas, he had wise men and shepherds, he had stars and gifts and trees and all the other things of Christmas, but no baby. And he thought that was perhaps a reflection of all the peripheral things of Christmas so crowding in people.

We've actually lost the heart. Alan Atwood's not a believer, I gathered from that article, but he found it nonetheless puzzling that he had no babies.

So I went around and started looking at my Christmas cards. I discovered that out of 150 approximately, I had 25 that had babies on them. So that's one in six, better than Alan Atwood.

I suppose you'd expect that in a sense, that being a Christian minister, you're slightly more likely to get religious type of Christmas cards. There are plenty of religious ones that have no babies.

[18 : 24] I don't mean to say in that, of course, that for a Christmas card to be valid, it's got to have a baby Jesus on it somewhere. But certainly in all the pressure, the hype, the expectations and the tensions, the family arguments and so on, sometimes the heart of the Christian faith, the heart of Christmas, can get overlooked.

Or forgotten. It's Jesus Christ himself. He's at the heart of it all. He is the word of life, the one whom John had seen, heard and touched, the one through whom the scriptures testify so that we too may have fellowship with God the Father and eternal life.

Christmas is more than a celebration of life. It's a celebration of the fullness of life, the eternal life that only Jesus makes possible.

And that, of course, is reason enough to celebrate. Amen. Amen.