

'Incarnation - a wider grasp'

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[0 : 00] Well, I think you'd agree with me that July is almost, not quite, as far away from Christmas as you can get. And John 1 is usually one of the Christmas readings.

And that's understandable because it shows so powerfully how the Christmas story that we celebrate in December is more than just the story of baby Jesus born in the manger, although that is a key part of it.

It reminds us that the Christmas story is also the start of the road to the cross, that the story goes on beyond Christmas.

It reminds us that the birth of Jesus is a fulfilment of prophecy, that Jesus didn't just appear and things then happened that made him special. Jesus' birth, Jesus' coming was very much planned.

And in John 1 particularly, we're reminded that the baby Jesus that we celebrate at Christmas is also the Logos, the Word of God incarnate, the second person of the Trinity.

[1 : 15] I wanted to make sure that I wasn't going to be preaching the same thing again in the same place. And I know that we looked at that Trinity aspect back in January 2020, before we got a wee bit distracted by the COVID lockdown.

And that was the last time I was with you for quite a while. But Christmas, celebrating Christmas every December, does ensure that we reflect on who Jesus is and the significance of his birth and his coming in the fullest extent.

But one of the problems with it is that it can mean that we think about, oh well the incarnation, that's part of the Christmas story, that's part of the Christmas celebrations, that's what we look at in December.

And we link the incarnation to the birth of Jesus and look no further. And you might even be thinking, why is he going on about Christmas? It is still July.

But John chapter 1, when you read it, has another link. And it isn't just about the birth of Jesus, because actually John links it to Jesus' baptism.

[2 : 27] And I don't know whether you've ever sort of felt, and sometimes the verses, the relevant verses get chopped out in the Christmas readings in December, but John, the writer of the Gospel, keeps switching between who Jesus is and John the Baptist.

Then he goes back a bit more about who Jesus is, and then he comes back to John the Baptist before going on in the rest of the chapter, beyond the reading that we've heard, to talk about Jesus' baptism.

So today seems a good day to revisit the incarnation, bearing in mind what's going on this afternoon. Before we look at John chapter 1, and picking up on what Carol was saying about how we have expectations about what baptism is, and it seems a bit different to be in the Cromity First this afternoon, and that reminder that Jesus himself was baptised in the River Jordan.

Many years ago I visited Italy, I think it was the first time I'd been to Italy, Carol wasn't with me at the time, but we visited, I think it was St. John Lateran in Rome, and we went into the baptistry there.

And most big cities in Italy have baptistries, and what you mean by baptistry in Italy is an entirely separate building, which is usually octagonal to the wayside, almost round, and it's a separate building to the main church.

[3 : 54] And I've not come across that before, and it was a wee bit of a surprise to go into this, thinking, what's this? And what are we going to find in there? And this particular one, if you could picture in your mind's eye, something like a circus ring about 40 feet across, you know, it wasn't a small building, it would be sort of this sort of size, but it was sort of roundish, and most of it was taken up by this, like a circus ring in the middle.

So you could gather around the outside, there was definitely this ring in the middle, and it was sunken, and you could lean on the rail and look into it, but the sunken bit would be about two foot six down, waist deep.

And that was where they held their baptisms in the early church. This would be going back to the fifth or sixth centuries. Some go back even earlier. But the idea in those days, and customs do change, was that you'd have one baptismal service for all the congregations in the city, at the same time, at Easter.

And so they wanted a whopping great baptistry that they could accommodate an awful lot of people at the same time. And I'm not quite sure how they went about it, but I suspect that you probably had lots of ministers in the water at the same time, with lots of people to baptise, and it was all going on at once.

And the supporters and the families and the friends from the congregations could gather around and lean on the rail and watch it all happen. And I would suspect, because of the numbers involved, that might go on all day, and people would come and go and use it.

[5 : 29] An entirely different way of going about it to what we're used to do today, I think in any denomination. Another time, we visited Ravenna, and they have some wonderful mosaic, again 1,500 years old and more, in their baptistries, and you've got a picture in each of them of Jesus standing up to his middle, in the river Jordan, being baptised, the dove, the Holy, he represented the Holy Spirit, portrayed as descending upon him, and John the Baptist, in this case, sitting on a rock, leaning on a rock beside him, so that the focus is on Jesus.

We often think that spiritual things are abstract, very much inward, what happens to us within ourselves, they're difficult to describe. But one thing about baptism is its physicality.

You can see exactly what's going on, and you get very wet. It's a very physical thing to happen, to experience, to witness.

And, John chapter 1, is all about the time when Jesus was baptised. And what John wants to begin with, in the verses that we were hearing earlier, is, who Jesus is.

because Jesus' baptism, was a bit different. And I just want to take you through, what those opening 18 verses, say in John.

[7 : 05] And some of them overlap, with what you would expect to hear, in a December service, but there are other bits and pieces, that we think, hang on, we don't hear about that at Christmas, this is a little bit more.

How does the incarnation, relate, to John the Baptist, and Jesus' baptism? So first of all, about the incarnation, the first couple of verses, in the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was with God in the beginning. Remind us about Jesus' eternal nature. He wasn't just a baby when he was born, he wasn't just an ordinary man, when he was baptised. He was, and is, and always will be, at the same time, the second person of the Trinity.

The Word of God, the Logos, the Son. When Jesus, went through his ministry, after he was crucified, buried, raised, he ascended to heaven.

That wasn't an elevation, some sort of promotion, that Jesus got, for what he'd done. It was his return, to where he'd come from, originally, where he eternally belongs.

[8 : 14] But the wonderful thing about the Incarnation, is it brings change to eternity.

Philosophers don't like that, because it doesn't make sense. But eternity changes, because when Jesus ascends, when he returns, he takes his humanity with him.

The second person of the Trinity, the Eternal Son, is also, human. We, when we pray to Jesus, we think of Jesus, seated at the right hand of God, the Father, but there is a humanity to that now, because Jesus, has ascended.

He was with God, in the beginning. The next two verses, remind us, of what Jesus' role of, was within the Trinity. Through him, all things were made.

Jesus was the instrument, through whom, everything was created. And it kept going. Without him, nothing was made, that has been made. In him, was life. And our other reading, from Colossians 1, verse 15, and onwards, spells that out, even more.

[9 : 28] By him, all things were created, and in him, and through him, all things hold together. He didn't just make everything, it's through his power, and through his role, that everything that is, is continued, kept going.

Everything holds together, because of the person we know, as Jesus. Verses 5 and 10, describe Jesus as light.

He is the one, that the dark, the dark can't comprehend. The light shines, in the darkness, but the darkness, hasn't understood it, hasn't overcome it. There's that sense, of comprehension, when you've got, some sort of mastery, over whatever it is, you're trying to understand.

The darkness, can't do it with Jesus. There is darkness around, but it doesn't get it, as far as Jesus is concerned. Hasn't got a clue, can't understand, doesn't make sense.

And, can't comprehend, in the sense of, has no hold on Jesus, no control. The darkness, can't put the light out.

[10 : 34] The darkness, is powerless, and confused, in the face, of the light, that is Jesus. It meant, that Jesus, wasn't recognised either.

He was in the world, and though the world, was made through him, the world, didn't recognise him. Simply, didn't get it. We read on, into verse 11, he came to that, which was his own, but his own, didn't receive him.

But, to all who did receive him, to those who believed, in his name, he gave the right, to become children of God. Jesus, who is the instrument, of creation, and keeping everything going, the word, the logos, the son, is also, the instrument, of redemption.

He doesn't, doesn't make everything, when everything, falls, because of sin, he then, redeems, and transforms, and saves it. Jesus is our Lord, Jesus is also, our Saviour, and our Redeemer.

And there's a hint, in these opening verses, of John's Gospel, of how, the world, was made flesh, he comes in as Jesus, into our world, he joins us, he steps out of eternity, and joins us in time, and he invites, and enables, we, who are, inhabitants of time, to join him, in due course, in eternity.

[11 : 59] He comes into our condition, and experience, and he invites us, to join him, in his. That takes a lot, of understanding, we haven't got a clue, what that will be like, but it's going to be wonderful, and that is what, we're saved for.

That great exchange, he takes our condition, our circumstances, so we, in turn, can enjoy his. John 14, the Word became flesh, and lived for a while, amongst us.

We have seen, his glory, the glory, of the only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace, and truth. The fact, that the Word became flesh, that Jesus was born, into this world, enables us, to understand, as far as we can, and in a unique way, that we can't understand, any other way, what God is like.

Somehow, we are enabled, to see, and recognize, God's glory, and his grace, his goodness, his truth. When we look at Jesus, if you want to know, what God is like, look at Jesus.

He shows us. And then, John 1, 16, from the fullness, of his grace, we all receive, one blessing, after another. It's not a static thing.

[13 : 16] It's a relationship, where we grow, and constantly learn, new things. I became a Christian, oh, 50 years ago, more. Oh. But, it's been a relationship, it's been a growth.

There have been, so many things, I've had to learn, and enjoyed learning, so many new things. Walking with Jesus, through a lifetime, and growing, and changing, and being changed, and being challenged.

It's a relationship, that grows, and we see, with the marriage, a relationship, that grows, and deepens, with the past, and the years. Two people, sharing their lives, knowing each other, better and better, year after year.

It's great. And, and greater still, is knowing Jesus. It's not a static thing, where we just, oh, I go to church, I always have done. I walk with Jesus, and it's a relationship.

The incarnation, brings us a quality, of life, that a religion, of law, keeping up, following the rules, never could. From the fullness, of the grace, we all receive, one blessing, after another.

[14 : 23] It's a growing thing. And so, at the end of this passage, verse 18, John concludes, the incarnation, enables us, as far as is humanly possible, to see, what God is like.

And we can reflect on this, and it's right that we do, every December, every Christmas time, as we celebrate, how the word, came into our world. But as I've said, the incarnation, isn't just an initiation, a one-off event.

Just as a marriage, isn't just a wedding, but a lifetime, together. And so, we need also, to relate the incarnation, not just to Jesus' birth, but to his life.

What does it mean, that it's the incarnate word, that is ministering, and preaching, and teaching, and healing? Jesus is dying, and rising. What does it mean, that the word, the logos, the second person, of the Trinity, the son, is crucified, and dies?

How can God die? What does it mean, that he's raised, from the dead? What does it mean, that he ascends, returns to the father? What does it mean, for us today?

[15 : 29] So many questions, so much more. And for us, for today, that question, what does John the Baptist, add, regarding the incarnation?

What does Jesus' baptism, add, to our understanding, of the incarnation? Why do we keep, cutting away, to John the Baptist, in this passage? Well, let's have a look, at these additional things.

Verse 6, we go back to verse 6. Suddenly, John, the apostle, the evangelist, the writer of the gospel, says, there came a man, who was sent from God, his name's John, as well.

There's another John. That reminds us, quite simply, that the incarnation, didn't happen in a vacuum. It's not just, an interesting fact. Well, that's interesting, it's a strong to believe it, and it just sort of, hangs there.

This is part of God's plan, and it always has been. And John the Baptist, has got a part to play in it, right from the very beginning. That's why John the Baptist, gets an introduction here, and John the gospel writer, says, hang on, we mustn't forget John the Baptist, because he's got an important, part to play.

[16 : 39] This is part of God's plan, and other people, are involved in it, as well. And so, we can read on, in verses 7 and 8, he came to the witness, to testify, concerning that light, so that through him, all men might believe.

If he wasn't the light, he came as a witness, to that light. That lack of recognition, that people, don't understand, who Jesus is, and God's desire, to save them, well, there needs to be, some communication.

God wants them, to know him, and to love him, and to know his love. They don't realise that, they don't understand, they're blind to it. How do we get, the two together? And it clearly, needs the initiative, to come from God's end, because the people, aren't going to work, it apart for themselves.

And that's why, we have John the Baptist, who is described, by Jesus himself, as the world's, greatest ever prophet, to come, and begin, to proclaim, the good news.

To tell people, watch out, there is somebody, really special coming, who is going to, transform your lives. And it's not really, John's saying, I might be a great prophet, but I'm nothing, compared to the one, that's coming.

[17 : 56] And so, there's this running, reminder, that John the Baptist, is the herald, he's the pointer, he's the signpost, he's not the reality. And however great, and exciting, John was, he was nothing, compared to the one, that he was announcing.

And verse 15, again, we cut away, John testifies, concerning Jesus, he cries out, this is he, of whom I said, he comes after me, he has surpassed me, because he was before me.

He was around, from the beginning, and he will be there, long after I've gone. And the more, you learn about Jesus, the more, you'll see, how much greater he is, than even, the great John the Baptist.

So, what do we take, from all that, for today? Well, the big thing here, the really, really, really big thing here, is the depth, and the extent, of the engagement, that God has, with the world, that he's created.

How far, will God go, to reach out, to this creation of his, that doesn't want, to know him? And the answer, is amazing, when we look, at what he does, through Jesus.

[19 : 06] John, is beginning, his gospel, like Mark, with Jesus' baptism, there's no Christmas story, in John, or Mark, John goes straight, to Jesus' baptism, but he wants us, to plot, who Jesus is, who is this person, whose baptism, is so special.

And, John the Baptist, gives Jesus, a big build up, a massive build up, a frightening build up, even, I mean, John paints, a terrifying picture, of Jesus.

And I have said, at other times, John had lessons, to learn, because he really, grasped that Jesus, is Lord, he hadn't really, thought that Jesus, was saviour, and had other things, to do, that confused John.

But in a sense, John is absolutely, right. John's big build up, is appropriate, because of who, Jesus is, as the incarnate, word of God. We must lose, sight of that.

But what John, then has to learn, and what becomes, evident, and people slowly, only very slowly, talk to you, is that the word, of God incarnate, the son of God, the second person, of the trinity, God, the son, Christ, Jesus, comes into this world, and as Wesley put it, emptied himself, of all but love, and identifies, with sinners.

[20 : 30] And basically, strips his clothes off, and gets into the water, and demands to be baptised, just like all these sinners, that have been lying up, to do so. How far is God, prepared to go, to reach out, to this world, that he's made, and that he doesn't want to know him, to the extent, of getting into the river Jordan, and identifying the sinners?

The depth, of divine commitment, the depth, of engagement, with creation. There is no philosopher's, detached from here, God is rolling up his sleeves, and getting stuck in.

But the fact, that John's baptism, is a baptism of repentance, is saying, that things aren't okay. God has some saving work, to do through Jesus, to restore, what's been fallen, and lost, back to life.

And together, the incarnation, and baptism, show that the place, that creation has, in God's plans, include, for the world to come. He's come, into our world, that we might know his.

He's come to earth, that we might know him. And it also says, because God is prepared, to step into this world, and roll up his sleeves, in the way that he does, that creation matters, an awful lot to God.

[21 : 47] There's an environmental, implication for that as well, that this is the creation, he's given us, to look after, and it is very dear to him. And we are right, to care for it now. Because it too, has a place, Romans 8 tells us that, it too, has a place, in God's future plans.

But Jesus' baptism, because of who he is, has a meaning, for how we view heaven. The incarnate word, later, will ascend, return, in a way, that we have a human, high priest in heaven.

C.S. Lewis, put it like this, once the second person, of the Trinity, takes on humanity, he won't lay it down again. And we are given, that same hope for ourselves, that we too, will be changed, we too, will be raised, we too, are eternally loved.

So Jesus' baptism, confirms, not only God's plan, to redeem and to save, but also points, to that divine fellowship, that he wants us, to know with him, because we are saved, we are saved, for a purpose, and that purpose, is eternal.

And that is why, as we baptise, as Christians, today, we do not continue, John's baptism, for repentance, that we baptise, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

[23 : 08] Because what Jesus did, including his own baptism, adds so much more, to what John had. And that is something, rich and great to do, give an awful lot, more thought on, and to celebrate.

But to conclude for now, on a lighter note, because it is so physical, and so obvious, baptism, including Jesus's, I would say, has always been, visibly messy, and indecorous.

There isn't a lot, standing on ceremony, with baptism. Jesus waded into, the rivers of Jordan, for John the Baptist, to baptise him. And you can imagine, the queue, lined up, of other people, waiting their turn, to be baptised, in the Jordan.

And just pause, to wonder, at the simple truth, of how the agent, of creation, the word of God, willingly, lets himself, be so, indecorously wet.

And how the messiness, of the whole thing, is dignified, by its meaning. You have that, messiness, that indecorously, and incredible dignity, and meaning, at the same time.

[24 : 22] And every baptism, points us, back to Jesus, and his determination, to save, and God's commitment, to showing his grace. And in baptism, we identify, with Jesus, as he has first, identified with us.

Because this, is something, that he did too. Amen.