

God's immense LOVE!

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[0:00] Father God, help us to rejoice in your promises, rejoice in your love, and we ask that you would speak to us now through your word.!

And having that reading from John 1 on Christmas morning, not necessarily every year but very often, John's gospel gives the backdrop to the nativity and it adds to its deep wonder.

We have the Christmas story that is so familiar to us of Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem for the census and there Jesus is born and the shepherds and the magi come and pay homage.

But John's gospel doesn't tell that story but it gives us the backdrop to it. Who is this baby really?

And John's gospel is no one off.

You find Paul making the same point in Colossians 1 and in Philippians 2. And just to vary it slightly, it's here in 1 John chapter 1 as well.

[1:26] That Jesus wasn't just a special baby who was born 2,000 years ago and a little over 2,000 now. But he is the word made flesh.

He is the image of the living God. He is God incarnate. The word became flesh and dwelt amongst us. And there is that sense that from the very, very beginning, from the dawn of creation, this was always God's plan.

And I want to think a little bit this morning about that sense of the passing of time. John chapter 1 takes us beyond time into eternity. There's a mystery.

But I want to think a little bit about the timing of the Christmas story today. Sometimes, time is a strange thing. Sometimes time can feel far too slow.

We can be so impatient when we're looking forward to something. Oh, why can't it happen? Why can't it come quicker? I want it. I want it now. Sometimes, it can have the opposite effect.

[2:33] That everything seems to be happening too quickly. And I really need time to slow down. I'm not ready. I need more time to prepare. And I'm thinking at the back of my head, yes, I really do.

We haven't even got the Christmas tree up yet. We've got so much to do before Christmas comes. And now there's only three or four days. And we've got all those preparations still to do.

And it might be a wedding. Or it might be a holiday. And certainly Christmas. And we can be sort of divided in our thinking about that. Oh, I can't wait for it to happen. But I need more time.

We can be at the same time impatient. And not ready. And perhaps we can be like that with the Lord as well. That we want the Lord Jesus.

We want to grow as Christians. And yet at the same time, we find ourselves holding back. I'm impatient. And I'm not ready. Can I really be both of those things at the same time?

[3:32] Evidently so. And there's a time scale with the Christmas story as well. And perhaps the Catholic churches, whether it's with a big C or a little C, capture something of that.

Because they have a feast of the Annunciation that they celebrate on March the 25th. Nine months before Christmas Day to the day. And that reminder that Mary was pregnant for nine months.

Perfectly normal. Perfectly normal pregnancy in that respect. And she had to wait. And she would have experienced through those nine months that same impatience and that same unpreparedness.

Oh, I can't wait until this is over and I've got the baby in my arms. And I'm not ready. I'm not prepared. But in real time, there was that nine months wait before the baby Jesus was born.

And it is likely, as I'm sure many of you know, that the wise men, the magi, probably didn't turn up on Christmas Eve at the same time as the shepherds.

[4:42] The sort of the tabloid that we have in all the cribs is probably out by the best part of a year. But we celebrate everything at once when we look back on it. But in reality, the shepherds came and went that night.

And there is evidence in Matthew's Gospel that the magi didn't show up probably for a year or more. And by that time when they arrive, Jesus is described as being in a house. And when Herod tries to kill Jesus, he goes for every child aged two and under. Playing on the stage in nasty character, Herod. The history of Herod is even worse than you find in the Gospels. But that's another story. But again, there is that time scale of things happening in real time as we read about the events of that first Christmas. And of course, Jesus, we leave as a baby.

And he is going to take 30 years or so to grow up, to go through childhood, adolescence, early adulthood. And it is likely that he was round about 30 years old when he began his ministry.

[5:49] That's the best guess. And 30 years is a long time. In the real time, in the real world, it's a generation later. And you wonder, were any of the magi still alive when Jesus begins his ministry?

Were any of the shepherds still around to remember? Probably, yes, the younger ones would have been older ones by then. But there would have been people who could remember, oh yeah, I remember that all those years ago.

Do you remember? I wonder how they sort of kept that story of that amazing night, the shepherds. And then nothing. Year after year after year, decade after decade.

Absolutely nothing. And here, in 1 John, John is writing as an old man. And he is drawing on his memories, that which was from the beginning.

Yeah, this is the word incarnate. That which we've heard, which we've seen with our eyes, which we've looked at and our hands have touched. Probably 30 years or more after those events, John, as an older man, is looking back.

[6:58] But memories remain. And those of us who are older realize how memories from 10, 20, 30, 40, 50 years ago remain as fresh as the day after.

There are things that we forget, but many of those memories we remember as vividly as the day they happened. And I got thinking about that, thinking of those 30 years.

What was I doing 30 years ago? What was I up to 30 years ago at Christmas time? And I looked in my photo album and I found this. It's actually New Year's Day 1995.

It's the nearest I could get to Christmas 30 years ago. That is our younger son, Peter, on the beach. Those of you who are eagle-eyed can spot your interim moderator.

It is not a seal behind him. That is Carol going for her New Year's Day dip. And I can remember that. I can look at the photograph, and we have the benefit of photographs these days to remind us of what we've got up to in the past.

[8:06] But it is a memory in my head as well. I can remember exactly where that beach was. I can remember parking the car and walking down the slopes and saying to Carol, You sure you want to go through with this?

Oh, yes, I do. I remember how quickly she got out of the water afterwards, and how quickly we returned to the car with her dripping wet and deciding she was going to dry off in the car, because it really was cold.

And Peter wearing his Santa hat was just the icing on the cake. But yeah, I can put memories together around the photograph. I am remembering this. I'm not just saying, Oh, yeah, I clocked that photo.

The disciples could very easily recall the events that they shared with Jesus. And so we've got these opening verse memories of 1 John as a fresh take on the Christmas story.

I think we better switch the interim moderator off now. You can tell her that I showed that next week. 1 John 1, verses 1 to 4.

[9:12] What does it say? That which was from the beginning, the Word. In John 1, he describes Jesus as the Word made flesh incarnate.

In the beginning was the Word. And here, so similar, that which was from the beginning. He's making the same point. There's no greetings like you find in Paul's letters.

He's straight in, just as he is with the Gospel, in the beginning. That which was from the beginning. And I wonder what John was thinking as he remembers what he was remembering. And perhaps seeing Jesus and looking into Jesus' eyes and somehow seeing eternity there. And realizing that if you want the meaning of life, if you want to know what it's all about, you're going to find that in Jesus in a way that you find it nowhere else.

If you want the answers, they are with Jesus. John wouldn't have remembered the Christmas events.

[10:22] He is called as a disciple when Jesus begins his earthly ministry. And John is one of the first disciples to be called. He would remember that. But going back to that first Christmas, you have the Magi who came looking for a king.

They had worked out that a king was being born in Israel. That prophecy was being fulfilled. And they were looking for a king to come and pay tribute.

Whatever their motives were, they'd twigged this and thought, we must go and pay tribute to this new king. And yet what they found wasn't just a king, not a mere king, but they found the word incarnate.

They found God. And somehow that human homage, the gifts that they'd brought for this special child in human terms, that homage was elevated to worship.

As they knelt down and presented their gifts, they knew that they were worshipping. They weren't just paying homage to a human king.

[11:34] That which was from the beginning. And John goes on to say, Amazingly, alongside that sense of infinity, of eternity, of timelessness, there is that material side, that which we have heard, we have seen with our eyes, we have looked at, we've gazed at, and we have, our hands have touched.

And that's the real shocker here. And people who are looking for spiritual reality, so often look anything, rule out anything tangible, because we're looking for something spiritual.

And anything that is physical, and touchable, and listen-toable, it's not spiritual enough. We want something ethereal. And yet, with Jesus, alongside that, that which was from the beginning, is somebody very material and very physical, who can be heard and seen and touched.

And the Gospels hint at this combination in odd ways, that in the presence of Jesus, an angry crowd, who has come to lynch Jesus, because they are angry with him, somehow, parts, as Jesus walks through them, and continues his way, unharmed.

What was it, about Jesus, that people discerned, that they felt, oh, we better not touch this man, we better not lynch this guy, there's something, about him.

[13:16] I stand back. When Jesus was put on trial, for his life, the morning that he went, he was taken to the cross, and he appears before Pontius Pilate. Pilate is the judge.

He is the one in power. He is the one in control, seemingly. And yet, when you read that Easter account, you see how Pilate fumbles, his role as judge. He gets tongue-tied.

He's uncertain. He's not sure what to do. There's something, there's something, about the presence of Jesus, that overwhelms Pilate, and overawes him.

And, that is part of the shock, of the incarnation. That there is nothing, more spiritual, than the logos, the word. And yet, there is nothing, more human, and physical, than the presence, of Jesus, who can be touched, and ultimately nailed, to a cross.

So physical. But put the two together, and you've got this unique person, in Jesus. We read, we read on, about Jesus, having fellowship, with the Father.

[14:30] We proclaim to you, the eternal life, which was with the Father, and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you, what we've seen and heard, that you may have fellowship, with us. And our fellowship, is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

All of those words, in this short passage. Jesus has fellowship, with the Father. Jesus has fellowship, with us. We offer fellowship, in turn, with you. And, in a sense, that is more part, of the Easter story, than the Christmas story.

When Jesus, after the last supper, and before he's arrested, and taken, to be crucified, speaks of this relationship. It's in John 13, 14, 15, 16, 17. It's a lengthy account, in John's gospel, where Jesus unpacks, the relationship, that he has, with the Father, and it says, we want to share this, with you, and, with everybody else, who believes, through what you tell them.

And that includes, you and me, here, in this room today. When Jesus, gets to John 17, and he's praying, for those, who will come, to believe, he is praying, for us.

And he is saying, the fellowship, that I have, with the Father, I want to extend, to you, and, to all, who believe. We, are included, in that.

[15:52] But it's something, that the nativity, points to. In the way, that Jesus, was born. Not in Sterling, he wasn't turned out, of Dunblane Hydro.

But, in those very, uncomfortable, initial surroundings, the poverty, that Jesus, was born in. Jesus, in a sense, even from the day, that he was born, or before that time, rolls up his sleeves, and gets stuck, into this world, with us.

There was a pop song, going around, about 20 years ago, along the lines of, what if God, was one of us? And, the answer is, well, he has done that.

He has made himself, one of us. And so, with that video, that we saw, welcome, but the hotel, can't afford you. Clearly written, to tie in with the lyric, and with the meter, obviously, so it echoes, Hotel California.

But, so true, that new take, on there is no room. It's not just, the hotel is, physically full up, we have, we've run out of beds, sorry, but that sense of, we have got no room, you don't fit into this world.

[17:07] Making room for Jesus, is inconvenient. And, John chapter one, the gospel account, speaks about, he came to, what was his own, and his own didn't want to know.

And, it speaks of the inconvenience, of having no room there. We can experience that, in our own lives, in lesser ways, at times.

We're busy, I'm too busy for this now, come back later. Our lives are so full, and they leave no room, for other things, or other people. And, especially, the inconvenience, of making room, for Jesus, and his demands, in our lives.

We can be, exactly the same. There isn't the room. My life is full, my life is ordered, there isn't room, for all the upheaval, that Jesus represents. Not now.

Come back later. Go to somebody else. Go elsewhere. And yet, when we realise, who Jesus is, is leaving Jesus, out of our lives, a price, that we really, want to pay.

[18:18] There is that challenge, there's always that challenge, because, making room for, making room for Jesus, is a big thing, and it changes, our lives, it turns our lives, upside down.

But on the other hand, however inconvenient, it is, as we begin to recognise, that here is the greatest hope, the greatest peace, the greatest joy, and the greatest love, it is something, really, that is a price, worth paying.

And, as we go back, to 1 John chapter 1, we see, John's final word, in this paragraph, we write this, to make our joy, complete.

What does John, mean by that? Well, Christians, Christians have often, been accused, of being pushy, we are evangelistic, by nature, we want to share, our faith, and it's not, because we want, other people, to be like us, it's because, we found something, wonderful in Jesus, and we can't, keep it to ourselves.

There's a sense, of a desire, and a longing, for fellowship, that we've, we've touched on, already. Our fellowship, is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus.

[19:36] That fellowship, between the Father, and the Son, the fellowship, that the Son, wants to have with us, how he wants, to include us, in that fellowship, that is something, about the nature, and the character, of God, that is sociable, that is loving, that is outgoing, that this fellowship, of being, one, with other people, that we find, within the Trinity, itself, that reflects, the very nature, of God.

As we enter, that fellowship, we begin, to share, that longing, as well. God's love, longs, for that fellowship, that love, wants to reach out, and embrace others.

We're not just, being pushy, it's actually, an effect, a side effect, of love. As we enter, that fellowship, we share, that longing, to share, that fellowship, further.

We see it, in the shepherds, in Luke's gospel, having seen Jesus, they went back, to the fields, to look after the sheep, and they didn't, keep quiet, either. It says, they made, quite a racket, on the way back, telling everybody, what they'd just seen, and experienced.

And John, closes here, we write this, to make our joy, complete. And so, in my closing, we've got the fourth advent calendar, lit today, representing love.

[21:02] How does it fit, that calendar? How does it fit, that love? Well, Jesus said, in John 15, as the Father, has loved me, so, have I, loved you.

Now, remain, in my love. Hope, peace, joy, and love, are all of them, interwoven. Each feeds, and draws on the others.

Each builds up the others. And, coming back, to our initial thoughts, about the passing of time, whether we are, impatient, and in a hurry, or whether we are, longing for more time.

That sense, of the passing of time, that nine month wait, that 30 year wait, the 2000 years, ever since, reminds us, that the love of God, is there, and it is long term.

And time, in that respect, is just a foretaste, of eternity. We really have, no idea, how great, and wide, and deep, the love of God is.

[22:11] But it will be good, to find out. Amen. Amen. Thank you.