

John 1:14-18
Tim Anderson 24/12/17
The Word became flesh

I was down at the Hastings Park Run on Saturday.
Pumping out my 5km
to atone for all of the chocolate that passes my lips.
And one of the organisers was explaining to us
that the first Saturday in January,
the route of our run is going to have to change
because Jimmy Barnes is going to be doing a concert
on the foreshore the next day.
And some wag calls out,
"He's going to come and do the Park Run with us too."
And he was rewarded with the laughter of the crowd.
Clearly it is inconceivable that the archetype of the working class man,
who lives on palatial acreage in Wonga Park,
would descend to the level of the Hastings Park Run.
So inconceivable that it's funny.

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."
If it's inconceivable
that Barnsie would come and do the Hastings Park Run,
surely it's more inconceivable that God would put on human flesh
and come and live among us.
But that is exactly what we celebrate at Christmas time.
People vow that they will never wash their hand again
after they have shaken hands with their hero.
Imagine if Queen Elizabeth announced
that she is do a final tour of her realm,
before she goes to meet her maker,
and she's decided that when visiting Australia
she's going to stay at your place.
"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."
It's more inconceivable than that.

Last week we thought about who God the Son really is.
The Word was with the Father eternally, from before creation.
Creation was made through him.
That's who came to live with us.
It's breathtaking that God would stoop so low.
But he did.

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."
If you translate 'made his dwelling' literally,
it says pitched his tent.
Which is not to say that Jesus was into camping.
When Jesus walked around Galilee,
he may well have slept under the stars,
without so much as tent,
let alone a self inflating hike mat and a sleeping bag rated to -2°C.
Why does it say pitched his tent?
Because in the Old Testament,
when God's presence came to be with his people,
it rested in the tent of meeting.
This is what God says to Moses in Exodus 25.
"Have them make a sanctuary for me,
and I will dwell among them.
Make this tent (tabernacle) and all its furnishings
exactly like the pattern I will show you."
So last time God came to live among his people,
he did it in a tent,
and here again,
the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us.
Of course it was very special thing
for the people of Israel to have the presence of God
visibly amongst them in the tent of meeting.
But how much more special it is,
to have God take upon flesh
and live among us as a talking, breathing human being.
When God lived among the people of Israel the first time,
it was quite a distant relationship.

God's glory was visible around the tent of meeting.
But only Moses could go inside and meet with the Lord.
This time Jesus made God's presence known to all.
He walked among the people.
Those who loved him and those who hated him,
both the powerful and the poor,
the righteous and the sinners.
Jesus spoke to all of them.
Jesus ate in their houses.
Jesus healed their sick.
The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

"We have seen his glory,
the glory of the one and only Son,
who came from the Father,
full of grace and truth."

That's a funny thing to say around Christmas time.

If there's one thing Jesus' birth didn't look like, it is glorious.
In the Christmas Carol, 'O little town of Bethlehem' we sing,
"How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given."

That's about right, isn't it?

God the Son slipped down to earth incognito.

Augustus Caesar certainly didn't know
that a King more important than him had been born in Bethlehem.
The chief priest in Jerusalem had no idea
that a priest more important than him had been born in Bethlehem.
God was turning the world upside down
without many people even noticing that it was happening.
And the baby Jesus was definitely not glorious
in the sense you see in Christmas cards.

You must have seen those Christmas cards,
where there's a glowing baby emanating rays like the sun
who is lying in a spotlessly clean manger,
in a very sturdily built stable.

Baby Jesus did not have that sort of glory.

He would have looked like a standard little Jewish baby.

His manger would doubtless have been a bit grotty because animals don't do dishes or clean up after themselves. And the stable itself was probably a rickety old building, because people save their best buildings for themselves not their animals.

That's not to say God's glory is never visible to the naked eye. If you go back to Moses, when he went into the presence of God in the tent of meeting, God's glory was visible.

It was glorious.

So much so that Moses' own face came out of the tent shining.

But Jesus' face was only like that rarely.

Maybe John says, "We have seen his glory,"

because Peter, James and John were up on the mount of transfiguration, when Jesus' face really did shine.

But I think it more likely,

that John is pointing to a different kind of glory.

'We have seen his glory,

the glory of the one and only Son,

who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.'

We see Jesus' glory in his grace and truth.

God is faithful and compassionate.

He is forgiving to the penitent sinner.

His saving love extends to those many would see as outside its reach.

It's a glorious love.

Jesus spoke the truth to all.

He revealed God's true plans.

Jesus was truth lived out.

That's why he said, "I am the truth."

And so God's glory is seen in Jesus being full of grace and truth.

But the thing is that not everyone recognises God's glory in Jesus' grace and truth.

God's glory in Jesus is hidden except to the eyes of faith.

When Jesus changed the water into wine at the wedding at Cana,

John says this,
"What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee
was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory,
and his disciples believed in him."
So Jesus' glory was revealed.
But it was only his disciples who recognised the glory
and put their faith in him.

As John's gospel progresses,
Jesus glory becomes focus on the most unusual place:
his death by crucifixion.
No person speaking from an earthly perspective
would say that crucifixion is glorious.
Humiliating, degrading, excruciating but not glorious.
And yet in John 12, Jesus says this,
"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.
Very truly I tell you,
unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies,
it remains only a single seed.
But if it dies it produces many seeds."
Jesus' glory is revealed in the cross.
And that because at the cross he fulfils the plans of his Father.
And for Jesus, his glory is in bringing glory to the Father.
And at the cross,
we see the fulfilment of God's grace and truth that came to us in Jesus.
There is grace at the cross,
because God's compassion finds a way to forgive us our sins.
There is truth at the cross,
because the sacrifice of the cross is a true solution to the problem of sin.
The penalty has truly been paid.
There is in truth, no more debt to be paid.
But only the eyes of faith can see glory in the cross.
The world sees defeat
where the eyes of faith perceive a glorious victory.

John the Baptist testified to Jesus' glory.

"He cried out saying,
"This is the one I spoke about when I said,
'He who comes after me has surpassed me
because he was before me.'"

The Bible tells us that John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets.
Isaiah wrote material that is quoted all over the New Testament.

Some chapters of Isaiah

are some of the most profound theology written.

How could John the Baptist be greater than him?

John doesn't even have a single surviving prophetic writing to his name.

How could he be the greatest?

He is the greatest because he points most closely to Jesus.

Isaiah could only point to a future hope.

John said,

"Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

And he was looking at him right there in the flesh.

The greatest prophet is the one points most clearly to Jesus.

And John could say to his disciples,

"Look there he is over there."

The job of a prophet is to direct people to know God and his ways.

John could say,

you want to know God - go and meet Jesus.

You want to know God's ways - go and watch Jesus.

No other prophet could ever do that.

It makes John the greatest prophet.

But what does it make Jesus?

John says,

"He who comes after me has surpassed me

because he was before me."

Jesus came after John.

He was born 3 months later or so.

His public ministry began after John's public ministry.

But he surpasses John because he was before him.

How was he before him?

Because in the beginning was the Word

and the Word was with God and the Word was God.
The eternal Son of God surpasses any prophet.

The revelation of God the Father that we get from Jesus
surpasses the revelation that we get from any prophet.
The greatest revelation of God and his ways given prior to Jesus
was the Law given to Moses on Mt Sinai.

What does John say?

"Out of his fullness
we have all received grace in place of grace already given."
Much and all as it receives bad press in our libertarian culture,
the OT law was in fact a wonderful example of God's grace.
It helped his people to know how to respond rightly to their God.
And when they fell short,
it gave them the means to make atonement for their sins.
It shaped the life of the nation,
giving the nation the way to keep right worship of God
at the heart of their life together as a nation.
But the grace that we have been given in Jesus
supersedes the Law in every way.
You see,
"The Law was given through Moses.
Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

Moses was just a person through whom God's law was given.
The grace that came with the law didn't come in the person of Moses.
It's like if I give one of my kids a present to give you,
they can give you the present,
but they are not present themselves.
But in the case of Jesus,
grace and truth was not given through Jesus Christ,
grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
He is the grace and truth with flesh on.
When God's people were given the law,
if they wanted to know how to live to please God,
they read the law.

If they wanted to know how to atone for their sins,
they needed to read in the Law about what the appropriate sacrifice was.
But we have Jesus.

If we want to know how to live a life that pleases God,
then we look at Jesus' life.

If we want to atone for our sins,
we have Jesus' sacrificial death.

What you could read about in the Law
was lived out in Jesus.

Grace and truth came to live among us in Jesus.

John continues,

"No one has ever seen God."

Moses wanted to see God's glory.

He asked God to be able to have a look.

And God said that he would show him his glory.

But he says in Exodus 33:20

"You cannot see my face,

because no one may see me and live."

The glory of a holy God is just too much for a broken human to stand.

The sun on the beach on a 25 degree day is lovely.

But if you were to be introduced to the sun close up,
you would be fried.

That's a picture of what it is like

to come into contact with God's holiness.

But here's the amazing thing.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

We got to see God himself, up close,
and there was no danger.

His glory was shielded from view.

"No one has ever seen God,

but the one and only Son,

who is himself God

and is in closest relationship with the Father,

has made him known."

Jesus deeply and personally and intimately knows the Father.
But that kind of knowledge of the Father was just not possible for us.
At least not first hand.

No one may see him and live.

But Jesus has made him known.

If you want to get to know the Father,
come to know the Son,
and by knowing the Son you know the Father.

Sometimes people say to me,
what's the application?

You've talked a lot of theology,
but what am I going to do differently tomorrow
as a result of this passage of Scripture?

But with a passage like this,
it's not about making some superficial change to how you live your life.
The Word became flesh and lived among us,
that changes absolutely everything,
not one little thing.

It tells you that if you want to know God,
then the one and only way you can do that,
is by knowing Jesus.

And so at Christmas time,
we recommit ourselves to knowing Jesus.

Grace and truth come through Jesus Christ.

Not just delivered by him, like Moses delivered the Law,
but lived out by him.

So if you want to know grace and truth
then you need to know Jesus and his life and his death.

It's no good saying,
"I already know that stuff."

That would be like someone
who can play Twinkle Twinkle on the piano,
saying I already know how to play the piano.

There's always more to know.

And knowing Jesus is not a hobby like playing the piano.

It's the reason for our existence.
If by faith you have seen his glory,
then life is about living for his glory.

Let's pray that we might be given power to
know the Word become flesh
to perceive his glory
and to receive his grace and truth.