

The True Wonder of Christmas

John 1:1, 14 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

What is this thing the world calls “the Christmas spirit”? It is a time when a kind of euphoria sweeps across the world. Scenes of Christmas lights, cosy snowy scenes, (even for people in hot climates that never see snow), misty-lensed pictures of red and green and gold and fireside scenes, seem to enchant and almost hypnotise people into a pleasantly friendly and half-dreamy state. Some of the grumpiest people I've ever known actually became tolerable human beings during the Christmas period. Movies roll off the Hollywood conveyor belt about the Christmas spirit, which is all about grumpy, selfish people who become friendly, kind and generous, from Ebenezer Scrooge to the Grinch. Pop groups release their Christmas albums where they stop singing about their selfish dreams of fornication and covetousness, and sing about the Christmas season, and the need to love and be generous.

It really is like a spirit that possesses the world. Most everyone feels it, particularly children. Words like *enchanted*, *magical*, *wondrous*, *mysterious* are thrown around. But of course, at the root and origin of this worldwide, universal celebration is a distinctly Christian, biblical idea. Christianity gave the world Christmas. What Christmas is really about is a truth from the Bible that Christians believe took place historically and has changed the world. That truth is mostly ignored, masked over, or drowned out in the eating, drinking, singing, shopping, and decorating.

Now some Christians react to the de-Christing of Christmas with an understandable disgust. They feel that something holy has been stomped on, profaned, and exploited for commercial and trivial purposes. And they are right.

However, I don't think Christians should stop there, and then be accused of having a bah-humbug approach to this time. For the real problem of the secularised Christmas is not that they celebrate too much, or that they feel too much wonder, or too much gratitude. The real problem is that they feel too little. A Christless Christmas has a feeling of awe, a childlike sense of innocence, renewal, hope, and love, but it is not too strong in its feelings, but too weak. That is, the Christmas of the world is a diluted, lukewarm, halfhearted thing, trying to hang on to the wonder, awe, love, gratitude, hope, innocence that the Christian Christmas gave it, but now seeking it in the cheap substitutes of tinsel and lights and drinking and eating.

C. S. Lewis put it thus: “Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

Christianity says, the real meaning of Christmas is a deeper and profounder sense of awe, a more permanent and enduring sense of wonder, the true root and source of experiences of love, hope, and gratitude.

If you enjoy the wonder, the hope, the family feel, the beauty of the lights at Christmas, then don't stop there! Those things are just the very edges of the true wonder of Christmas. Those things are just the absolute surface layer of the true enchantment, the true mystery of this time. If you stop there, then you are like the people Jeremiah called out, who settle for drinking from broken, leaky reservoirs, when they could be drinking from God Himself, the fountain of living waters.

What then is the true wonder, the true mystery, the true beauty of Christmas? One of the clearest places to see it is in John 1. John 1 is likely the clearest passage in the Bible that tells us of the

Incarnation, that God became man.

To understand it, we need to take verse 14 and read it in light of verse 1. Like two slides which must be overlaid to see the whole picture, we must take verse 14 which speaks His being made human, in light of verse 1 which tells us His essential nature to understand the wonder and the glory of this event. Who exactly was it that became flesh and dwelt among us? As we look at the three phrases of verse 1, and lay them next to the three phrases of verse 14, we will come to an understanding of why this day is meant to be a day of wonder. From there, we can compare the Christmas spirit that surrounds us with the kinds of affections that well up in those who behold this glory.

I. The Eternal Word Became Human

“In the beginning was the Word”

Using the same phrase that the Bible opens with, John tells us that at the very beginning, there existed someone called the Word. *The Word* is a translation of a Greek word, *logos*. Long before the birth of Christ, Greek philosophers had been using this word. Some Greek philosophers had spoken of an unknown mediator between God and the world. They had called this Mediator, the Logos. The ancient Hebrew sages used to speak about God's *memra*, or His Word, that was like an extension of Himself. Some rabbis even spoke of two powers in Heaven, as they grappled with what seemed like plurality in God.

John says, in the beginning, this Person, called the Word, was already there. Notice, the Bible does not say, in the beginning the Word *came into being*. It does not say, in the beginning, the Word *began*. It simply says, in the beginning *was* the Word.

The Greek original is in the imperfect tense. It means was and continued to be. If we wanted to very literally translate it, we might say, In the beginning was being the Word. In the beginning, existing was the Word. It is no accident that these words are identical to the way Genesis 1:1 begins; “In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth.” John wants us to know that the Word was not part of that creation, He was before that Creation.

According to the Bible this Word was not part of the time-space creation. He was not one of the things God made. When time began, the Word had always been existing. He had already been existing for more lifetimes than we can fit into our finite minds. When time began, the Word had been alive for as long as we will live in heaven – for an eternity.

All of us have memories of early childhood. Perhaps there is still a memory you have of some scene or place from when you were even a toddler at the age of two or three. But then the memories stop. We can't remember absolute infancy, or being born or being in the womb. Our memories only go as far back as when our life was two or three or four years old. The reason for that is we all had a beginning.

What would it be, to be a Person, who has memories that go back not decades, not centuries, not millennia, but aeons – years beyond counting? And that there is no stopping point for the memories because there was no beginning. A memory like a bottomless well, no end, no limit, because there was no beginning. Only a person with aseity, self-existence, could have that.

This Word was Eternal.

But I said we must overlay these truths of verses 1 and 14.

The first phrase of verse 14 says: And the Word became flesh. That is a staggering phrase. He

became physical, he became one with a heartbeat, a respiratory system, eating, breathing, sleeping.

When I say God the Son became a man, I don't mean, God the Son turned into a man, like in the fairy tales where a prince turns into a frog. I don't mean God the Son appeared like a man for 33 years, and then threw off that appearance when He went to heaven, as if His humanity was just a shell, an outer clothing He was wearing. I mean, God the Son added to His divine nature a true and perfect human nature. He did this by entering humanity the way all of us enter humanity – by being born.

There were several occurrences in Scripture of heavenly beings appearing in human form. Angels looked like men when they visited Abram, and ate his food and drank. They were recognised as men when they went into the wicked city of Sodom. However, those beings simply had the appearance of being human for the brief time of their task on earth. Those angels took human shape to deal with living humans.

However, the Incarnation is different. God is not simply appearing to be a man. God is not projecting the image of being a man. God is becoming a man. God is adding to His nature a true human nature, by being born.

C.S. Lewis: The Eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that a foetus inside a woman's body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab.

It was this Word, this Person who had always existed in Himself that became flesh. He was born. The One who had no beginning was now united to a human nature that had a birthday. The One who had lived for ages uncountable was now given an age. He was two, he was fifteen, he was twenty-four. During one dispute with some religious leaders, they said to him, you are not yet fifty years old, and you claim to have seen Abraham. To which Jesus responded, Truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.

He had fashioned Michael and Gabriel, but now He was told He needed to turn twelve before He had come of age. He had walked with Adam in the Garden, but now He was not old enough to join the Sanhedrin.

This is what the angels wondered at. This is what left prophets staggered and dumbfounded – that the one whose goings forth have been from everlasting, should now be born in Bethlehem – that the Mighty God should now be a child born. Compare the wonder, enchantment, awe of contemplating this with the shiny baubles, and the mythology of Santa Claus, and ask, which produces more awe, more wonder, more amazement. You want a miracle, what some call magic? Here is the central one of all time: The eternal Word became a human.

II. The Triune Word Became Family

“and the Word was with God”
“and dwelt among us”

The next phrase in John 1:1 increases the mystery and the wonder of this person. It simply says, the Word was with God. Verse 2 makes it abundantly clear. This one, this same one *was* (same word as verse 1) existing in the beginning with God. Before the beginning, the Word had been eternally existing alongside God. The word for *with* can literally mean *facing*. The Word had been facing God, beholding Him, in a reciprocal relationship of love and fellowship.

But something almost appears contradictory. The end of verse 1 tells us that the Word was God.

Verse 3 and verse 10 tell us that He was the Creator. So how can the Word be God, the Creator, but also be with God, alongside God?

It is only possible if there is a way that the Word is God and a way in which God is not the Word. The Word is God, but yet He is with God.

Verse 18 solves it for us. Within God there is more than one person. There is the Person revealed as the Father. He is the one meant in verse 1 and 2 when it says the Word was with God. But then, there is also the Son. Some versions even have the *only begotten God*. There is the Person who is begotten, known as the Son. But because He was with the Father in the beginning, He was never made or born the way sons are born to fathers in the human realm. Instead, they have always related as Father and Son from eternity. Instead, His begottenness is another way of saying His Sonness, His relationship to the Father as Son.

And we don't have to go much further in John to find out that there is another Person who has always been there, from eternity – the Spirit.

John 1:32 ³² And John bore witness, saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him.

Now no illustration in all of creation could help us understand what it means for God to be a three-personal Being. There are all sort of hints in creation of things that are three and yet are one: space with height, length and width, time with past, present, future, colour with three primary colours, matter is solid, liquid, gas, but these and hundreds of others can never fully express the reality. But this Word was always in full fellowship with His Father.

This Word was Triune. This means that God enjoyed perfect love, and happiness in Himself. He did not need to create, and He definitely did not need to redeem.

But now, lay verse 1 on top of verse 14, and look at the second phrase of verse 14.

“And dwelt among us”

He was dwelling before the Father, but now He dwelt among us. He chose to dwell, to pitch His tent, and be among us as one of us. He is joining our family forever.

In Asia Minor, a very ancient inscription was found, showing how early Christians understood the Incarnation. It presents the Word, the Son of God speaking, and it reads: “I am what I was – God. I was not what I am – man. I am now called both, God and Man”.

He did this because only by becoming a man could He become our Saviour. We needed a Mediator, who could be both God and man, put His hands on both parties, be a substitute for men on the Cross, and yet be divine and able to bear the weight of God's punishment.

“Jesus has never forgotten what it means to be weak. He never will forget. Precisely because He walked this earth as a fragile human being, experienced testing, passed through suffering, and learned obedience, He is now qualified to be our merciful and faithful High Priest. He is the one mediator between God and humans. He is able to help us when we are tempted. He is able to save us to the uttermost. And for our part, we can come boldly to the throne of grace, knowing that we shall obtain mercy and find help in time of need.” Kevin Bauder

Now think of all the movies that speak about love, about being kind and generous, about the spirit of giving. Those are sweet, but they are clouds without water, flowers with no roots. Real love, real generosity, real grace is when the God-facing Word, left His Father's throne above, so free, so infinite His grace, emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam's helpless race.

The glory of this time is not about an Ebenezer Scrooge becoming loving, or enemies becoming sentimentally kind for a week or two. The real, original story of bad, mean people becoming different sounds like this:

"For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. ⁴ But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, ⁵ not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

The eternal Word became human. The triune Word became family.

III. The Divine Word Became Visible

and the Word was God.

This third phrase clear up any doubt: the Word was God. The first two also suggest that. The Word had always existed in Himself, and there is only one Being who has always self-existed, and that is God. There is only one who could have been with God from the beginning and that is God. But here John clears up any doubt. The Word was God. Once again, it is the same word that was used to say He *was* in the beginning. He had always been existing in the beginning, and so in the same way, He had always been existing as God.

The Word shared equally in the essence of God. The Word was fully and totally God in His being.

That means the Word was all-knowing. The Word was all-powerful. The Word was all-present. The Word was perfect, not changing for the better or the worse. The Word was self-existent and self-sufficient, not needing anyone or anything else for life. The Word was the Creator of all things as verse 3 tells us, and therefore the Sustainer of all things. He was the supreme Lord over all He had made.

The Word was divine. Now the one problem with being God is that humans cannot see you. Verse 18 tells you how possible it is to behold God. ¹⁸
No one has seen God at any time.

Now once, again, let us place the slide of verse 14 over the slide of verse 1.

And we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

God in His perfect glory cannot be seen by the optical nerves and brains of flesh and blood. For two reasons. One, that would be like placing a supernova in front of someone. The sheer power and glory would incinerate flesh and blood. Second, God as Spirit can't be seen physically, though He can certainly be known and understood. Much of what we say about the essence of God what is known as negative theology. We say what God is not, because we struggle to fully explain what He is. Scripture teaches that God is unchanging, infinite (without limits), eternal (without time),

But now, this invisible, divine Word was made visible.

But here, John says we beheld His glory. Verse 18: he only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared *Him*. (John 1:18) We could see that he was the only begotten of the Father. Only begotten means unique and it also means, sharing the same nature. Clearly they could see that Jesus was one with the Father.

Now, with Jesus of Nazareth, they could see God. They didn't fully understand it at first, but progressively, they came to realise who it was that ate with them, and lived on the open road with them.

Of course, they are not interested in the physical appearance of Jesus, which they never describe. They are interested in the words and works of Jesus, that reveal who this God is.

They saw His glory, not when as self-existent and self-sufficient He called on a miracle to sustain himself, but when he fasted for forty days, and grew thin, when he often existed on meagre provisions as they travelled about.

They saw His glory not only when He spoke to storms and calmed them, and sent demons fleeing, and made disease just about evaporate everywhere He went, but when He was exhausted, weak, tired beyond reckoning, and labouring on.

They saw His glory not only when He knew all things, past, present and future, but when He submitted to not knowing things.

They saw His glory not only on the Mount of Transfiguration when He shone in glory, but also when He looked plain, so that that Isaiah said, "there is no form nor beauty in him that we should desire him", and Judas had to identify him with a kiss so that the soldier could tell Jesus apart from the others.

They saw His glory not only when He had perfect joy in prayer with the Father, but when He wept at funerals, and felt anger at hard hearts, and felt compassion on multitudes.

They saw His glory not only when as God infinite without bounds He could walk on water, and cross distances, but when He walked from place to place without horse or donkey, without a home. Most of all, they saw His glory when, as the Lord of life, he submitted to death, refusing to call on those legions of angels to free Him, drinking the cup of our sin so as to save us.

They saw His glory, full of grace and truth. This invisible, eternal, infinite Word was now visible, tangible. What does God look like? What does God say? How does God treat people? Look at Jesus, and you have your answer. That's what God is like positively.

What do we have here in John 1? We have mystery, wonder and awe, and plenty of it. We have kindness, love, and generosity. We have hope, belief and faith. But it is not the mystery of the season, or hope for hope's sake, or faith in faith, or loving our love, or feeling positive for the sake of Christmas spirit. If you go no further than the optimistic good mood of Christmas, you have chosen mud pies over a seaside holiday. You are choosing to be satisfied with a cheap sweet instead of a luxurious feast.

Today, if you are a Christian, you should have the deepest awe, the most trembling joy, the most adoring gratitude for a *Person*. The Person is the Word, the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah.