

## **WORD, LIFE, LIGHT, TESTIMONY, REJECTION, ADOPTION, INCARNATION**

### **Christmas 2012 – John 1:1-14**

There is an honesty to John's Gospel that may not be universally recognized. The first three Gospels are records of the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth. Each of the three has a special slant, reflecting a message the author wished to emphasize for his or her readers. The fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John is more theological than the first three. John consistently sees Jesus' full divinity present in his full humanity; and the opening of John's Gospel, our Gospel for Christmas Day, encapsulates his essential message – as does the opening of any good book.

But the honesty I mention is that John himself is present in this Gospel. From Matthew's Gospel, we get an idea of Matthew's special interest in the Jews who had doubts about Jesus' messianic identity; and so, Matthew goes out of his way to show how Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy in what we now call the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. We learn of Matthew, then, that he is a Jewish Christian, not a Gentile Christian; and he wants his fellow Jews to receive Jesus as he has received Jesus – specifically as the Hebrew Messiah.

Mark is more of a reporter than Matthew, and yet Mark's manuscript sounds very much like a story a storyteller would recite in a storytelling circle. It is full of conflict, has a great deal of movement, and ends abruptly in its shorter version, allowing the reader to make his or her own ending to Jesus' story.

Luke's is an elegant Gospel, beautifully written, expressive of the apostolic church's understanding of Jesus. In fact, Luke's Gospel has a sequel in the Book of Acts: both are written by the same author, and there are cross-references in the two documents. Luke, more than any of the evangelists gives prominence to women; and so I like to speculate that Luke may have been a woman.

But the truth is that we only have inklings of who Matthew, Mark, and Luke were through their Gospels. John is different. John's Gospel is more of a personal testimony of who Jesus was for him. He purports to have been close to Jesus, calling himself the Beloved Disciple. He may or may not have been the person he claims to be, but without question, his influence, especially in the church, has been significant. John provides a sophisticated theological landscape for Jesus that suggests Jesus' birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection has universal and cosmic significance. For John, Jesus is the watershed of religious knowledge and understanding: all that came before Jesus is reinterpreted and redefined by his life and death; his ministry of healing, preaching, and teaching; and most especially by his resurrection. In John's Gospel, we see John himself so challenged and inspired by Jesus of Nazareth that he, in a sense, interprets who Jesus is as watershed and as a human whose identity has universal and perhaps even cosmic significance. In John's hands, Christianity has legs.

And so, each Christmas Day, we read the beginning of the Gospel of John – for its honesty, for its poetry, and because it reaches into our churches and into our lives in a way the mere narrative of Luke's and Matthew's birth stories do not. In John we see a seven-step progression of understanding around who Jesus is and who we are because of God's revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. The progression can be described as Word, Life, Light, Testimony, Rejection, Adoption, and Incarnation.

**Word.** For John, Jesus is the Word above every word; the centre and meaning of existence; the full expression of God's love and grace which, as he writes, was, is, and ever shall be. It is fully present and elegantly revealed in Jesus. Jesus is God's definitive word for humankind: whatever was lacking is now said; whatever was misleading is now corrected; whatever ambiguity remained is now removed. Jesus is the full and final revelation of God's will and love for the world: in Jesus' we see the very presence of God among us as one of us.

**Life.** Jesus comes among us and teaches us who we are because of God's love. It appears as if we're born, we live, and then we die. But Jesus speaks of such depth of being that people begin to glimpse the eternal in the temporal, the extraordinary in the ordinary, spirit in flesh. We are called, Jesus teaches and shows us, to live for the glory of God, to use our lives in praise of God by living as children of God. Remember God's Word that has been spoken into our lives, and repeat that Word with your own life as part of God's greater life, Jesus teaches. Remember who you are!

In that understanding as life as more than we ever knew and can ever know, is light for the darkness. We can live beyond ourselves, beyond our needs and wants and create in our world a home for justice and righteousness that will bless the many as we seek one another in love. We no longer need to number our days as the measure of worth; rather we can explore the dimensions of love that connect us with the divine will. Love God by loving your neighbour, Jesus teaches; take light into the darkness of evil and even be that light.

In the other John we learn about early in the Gospels, John the Baptist, we see what the church has called a prophet, a forerunner, a herald. But in John the Evangelist's hands, the Baptist also shows the first marks of discipleship. In the synoptic gospels, we can take a leap and speculate that John the Baptist had had some contact with Jesus of Nazareth before beginning his ministry of baptism for the repentance of sins by the River Jordan. In the fourth gospel, we receive an even clearer message that John testified concerning the great and mighty acts of God present in the man Jesus. He is the archetypal disciple.

"He was in the world; and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." Rejection, we learn is also part of Jesus' story and our story. There are no gimmies in a world that has become self-consumed. Love, mercy, justice, and peace – the very stuff of God – have to create a place in such a world. There is resistance. God interrupts the flow and is in the way. Later, Jesus will teach, "How blest are those who know their need of God." In the meantime, rejection.

Jesus touched some; many, in fact. And his message for them was welcome and adoption. John writes, "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become the children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." Those who receive Jesus have a new family and a new family name – "children of God." What a concept! Could it be that the invitation of welcome is for all people?

Incarnation. And the Word – God's Word in which life is revealed and from which the true light shines – became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth. The incarnation of the Word is our hope, our peace, our comfort, but also the way in which God is known and experienced among us. We can embody God's word by imitating Christ Jesus, by his being born in us – the ultimate Christmas, so to speak.

On Friday, a family from our congregation gathered for a service at one of our local funeral homes. It was a very sad occasion – the death of a newborn. It was also a time of deep love and care as everyone pulled together and supported one another. I said to those present, "God's love is present in our love. In fact, our love and care for one another *is* God's love and care for us in this time and place." This may be the most significant message of Christmas: that God in Christ Jesus is truly with us; that we see and understand in Jesus' birth the pledge of God's real presence in our world; and most particularly, in our life together as those who have been called by Water and Word.

We give thanks this day to John the Evangelist for his help in unwrapping for us God's gift in Christ Jesus.