

“THE WONDER OF CHRISTMAS”

John 1:1-14

Many of you will have read in the newspaper or heard on the news about the poor old vicar who appalled the infants (or, at least, their parents) at a primary school down south when he told them that Santa Claus would explode if he travelled fast enough to deliver all their presents in one night. Upsetting the children is a prospect all those of us who take primary school assemblies have to face. To give him his due, he was trying to make a humorous point about the various stories of Christmas and he was one of many, no doubt, whose interest has been aroused by attempts to explain aspects of our Christmas traditions.

A couple of years ago, Roger Highfield, author and Science Editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, wrote a book called *Can Reindeer Fly? The Science of Christmas*. It's an immensely entertaining book (and, I suspect, the source of the vicar's information) and looks at all aspects of Christmas from a scientific perspective, musing on what is possible and what is simply impossible. There are chapters on the problems of delivering presents to 842 million chimneys whilst travelling a distance of 356 million miles in 48 hours (if you start at the right place you can extend the day by going against the rotation of the earth), on the technology of growing Christmas trees, on the probability of a virginal conception (quite possible, given the right circumstances), on the marketing of Christmas food and gifts, and so on.

And there are plenty of other articles and programmes over Christmas which look at the facts of Christmas – the statistics and the surveys, the attitudes and the economics. Some of the things you'll read are blindingly obvious – 60% of people surveyed find Christmas either stressful or depressing (only 60%?): one in five workers will take three or more days off over Christmas because of hangovers. Some of them may well confirm your suspicions – women prepare a mental list of what to buy at least six weeks before Christmas and men leave it all to the last minute (some of the women I know compile really mental lists!): nearly half of people surveyed insulted their boss at the office Christmas party and 33% had “canoodled” with colleagues on the same occasion. And some of the things are quite staggering – the ingredients of your Christmas dinner may have cumulatively travelled 24,000 miles from the producer to your table: £6.4 billion is spent in December on credit and debit cards in the UK.

Christmas can easily be reduced to facts and figures. The stories and myths are dissected and discussed and everything has to be explored and explained. And that goes not only for the traditional Christmas myths, such as Santa Claus and reindeer, but also the actual story at the heart of it all, the story of the birth of Jesus himself. Those of us who would think of ourselves as evangelicals are perhaps the worst at it. Because of our high view of the Bible, we feel we have to insist on the facts. It all happened exactly as the gospel writers tell us – if not, then our faith would be in danger of disappearing (or so we think).

For us, the Christmas story has to be a story of real events. We rejoice at the kind of things Roger Highfield writes about the legitimacy of the story of the star guiding the wise men from Central Asia. We beat sceptical opponents of our faith over the head with the findings of Professor of Genetics, Sam Berry, that a virgin birth is quite conceivable (forgive the pun). We bang on about the historical accuracy of Luke's account, with all its details about dates and rulers and censuses. All the things which might appear to be barriers to nice, rational agnostics coming to believe the truth of the gospel story we try to explain – not to explain *away*, but to show that it's all perfectly possible and plausible. And it is – don't get me wrong: I'm not trying to debunk any of it.

But haven't we perhaps got to the stage where we have lost out on the sheer **wonder** of it all. This is an amazing story. It's a story that has literally changed the world. Whether you believe in its literal truth or not, there's no denying that the story of the birth of Jesus – and of his subsequent life and death and resurrection – has had a profound effect on the lives of men and women around the world. It is a story like no other: more powerful than any pagan myth; more inspiring than any work of fiction; more motivational than any philosophy; more far-reaching than any other story in the history of humankind.

And yet we have tried to domesticate it, to bring down to our level where we can explain it all, measure it all, confine it all within the limits we have set – the limits of science and rational belief and so on. The birth of Jesus, the story of the first Christmas was a unique event, and so it calls for unique language and a unique approach. There are all kinds of problems and paradoxes which we have to hold in tension, all kinds of things that we still can't quite explain adequately, all manner of details that should leave us open-mouthed in astonishment, not steely-browed in our determination to provide a rational explanation.

That's why John's prologue, the first paragraphs of the *Gospel of John*, which I've just read, are such a necessary complement to the earthy historical realism of Luke's account of the birth of Jesus. John uses the language of poetry and of theology to emphasise that this is a story of wonder, a story that in many ways just doesn't make sense to people who want a scientific explanation for everything, who are looking for rational explanations for every little detail. (It does have to be said, of course, that much of the sentimental drivel we sing so lustily at this time of year about animals worshipping and soundless babies and snow-covered stables is pure fiction which owes nothing to the biblical accounts anyway.) John's account relies on paradox for its force and invites us to stop and ponder in amazement at what Christmas is all about. Let's just look at a few of the things he writes about here, and pray that God, by his Holy Spirit, will renew in us a sense of wonder at this unique story.

1. THE ETERNAL BECAME TEMPORAL

Then opening sentence of this passage tells us that Jesus has always been around. John starts this book with the same expression that we find right at the start of the Bible – “*In the beginning ...*” In other words, Jesus has existed from all eternity. Well, there's a curious thought, to start with. Yet he was born as a baby in a particular cave round the back of a pub in an identifiable geographical and historical place at a fixed moment in time. Jesus, who had always been there, who had always existed, suddenly comes, bloody and bawling from between the legs of human mother into our world.

But we often seem more anxious to ask “How can that be?” than “Why should it happen?” Well, if God was going to make a real difference to our world, it really had to be done in a way that people would understand. There was no point in God bellowing out of the sky every now and then and hoping that people could understand. He sent his Son, a part of himself, to this earth at a certain point in the world's history, so that his life and his teachings and his death could be made available to all men and women. For all this to be real to people, it had to happen in time, in a context that people could identify with.

The great God of all eternity, “*Immortal, ineffable, the only wise God*”, came into our time-scale, he limited himself in that way to become as real as possible to us, people who need something to see and to touch, so that we could respond that much more easily and come to him without fear. Jesus is not some Doctor Who-like Time Lord, some character from *Star Wars*, not even, as the Greek and Roman gods were, a deity who sent down messages from somewhere up in the clouds or who appeared on earth as a fully developed human being (or, indeed, as a swan or a bull or a tree!). That leads us into our second paradox, our second reason for wonder ...

2. THE DIVINE BECAME HUMAN

Jesus not only invaded our time-scale – as we've just said, the Greeks and Romans believed that their gods did that, too – but he came as a human being. He didn't arrive as a weird creature, or as a talking animal, or anything like that. Jesus, who was part of the awesome, eternal Godhead, who was divine, who had at his disposal all the power and glory of heaven, came into our world as a messy, wrinkled lump of flesh and bone, covered in blood and all the rest. He was laid down in a cot cobbled together from a

feeding trough and wrapped up in strips of cloth from someone else's clothes. He was human from the very moment of birth.

Then he grew up as a human being. We don't know much about his childhood, apart from the episode when he became separated from his parents in Jerusalem, but we do know that he was tempted to sin, he cried, he laughed and he died a physically agonising death. Jesus was "*Immanuel – God with us*". God had come into our world as a human being so that we couldn't say, "Well, it's OK for him, he doesn't know what it's like." He had to be different from all the other gods and goddesses of the false religions: he had to be truly and authentically human.

But not only so that he could identify with us. It was also so that he could take on himself the consequences of human wrong-doing. For centuries the people had been trying to get themselves right with God by sacrificing animals, and it hadn't worked. It was necessary for a human being to take on himself the punishment that each of us rightly deserves and so make it possible for us to enjoy and renewed relationship with God. So he died, taking all that on himself. That's why the divine God became an ordinary human being. I don't understand it, but I believe it and stand in awe of it.

3. THE INVISIBLE BECAME VISIBLE

No-one has ever seen God face to face – John tells us that in this first chapter of his gospel (*1:18*). Even Moses had to make do with a glimpse of God's glory from behind as he passed over the mountain at Sinai. For many people that makes God a remote and distant deity. He lives "up there", no-one's ever seen him, so we make up our own mind about his character and appearance. He ends up looking like Charlton Heston with a long white beard, or William Blake's muscular geriatric, or like the Lego Holy Trinity I discovered on the *Ship of Fools* website last week. And, if we don't actually visualise him, he becomes some remotely abstract concept – a thundering and avenging dispenser of justice to the infidel, or the force within ourselves that we shape according to our own will, or simply some sociological construct.

When Jesus came into our time and into our existence, he was able to make God real to us. He showed us what God is like. He didn't do it in terms of appearance – that would be to limit and domesticate him again – but in terms of character. He showed the anger of God in the Temple courtyard as he trashed the traders' tables; he showed the compassion of God as he blessed the children and healed the sick, as he touched the leper and wept with the sisters at the grave of Lazarus; he showed the awesome power of God as he stilled the storm; he showed the care of God for his creation as he fed the crowds and turned water into wine; he showed the frustrated love of God as he sobbed over the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

Later in the gospel, John tells of Jesus' explaining to his disciples that whoever has seen him has, in effect, seen the Father. Jesus made the invisible God visible to us, he made it more possible for us to approach him, he made God something more than just a concept in the sky, something more than a word in a prayer book, something more than a cry of despair on the lips of an unbeliever. He made God a father, a friend, a lover, a saviour, a listener, a person with whom we can have a real and authentic relationship. Is that wonderful, or what?

But again, we ask the question "Why?" In a sense, once we have realised the awesomeness of it all, we're not really concerned with the how, but with discovering what made God do it at all?

4. THE HOPELESS CAN BECOME HOPEFUL

No longer are women and men cut off from a remote and uncaring God. No longer is the human life a hopeless and meaningless existence. Our purpose on earth isn't simply to eat, sleep and reproduce, a

seventy-year trudge through the vale of tears and then a lottery as to whether our good works outweigh our bad and we get to enjoy some kind of paradise – or simply oblivion. So many people have no purpose to their lives, no hope at all – it's just do-as-you-would-be-done-by, try to keep things sweet with your neighbour and enjoy the odd few moments of happiness.

Many of the great writers and philosophers of the twentieth century (and now the twenty-first) would have us believe that life is absurd, it has no point: it is, in every sense, hopeless. But God says “No!” In Jesus, God became human: there **is** hope. Look at what John writes in *vv12,13*. As we believe in Jesus, as we lose ourselves in the wonder of what he has done, so we are able to become “*born of God*”. Our relationship changes from that which is articulated by King Lear in his moment of deepest despair – “*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods: they kill us for their sport*” – to that of children of God, with all that entails for his care of us, his compassion for us, his eternal presence with us.

But don't ask “How?” This Christmas ask, “Why?” That's the amazing thing, that's the wonder of Christmas. For a God who created this universe, for whom all things are possible, then there's no problem with the “How” – he can do it and we can discover it. But why? Well, because he loves us. John tells us that in *John 3:16*. The very idea of people who are hopeless ever having any hope is a paradox in itself, but to overcome that hopelessness, Jesus has made the eternal become temporal, the divine become human and the invisible become visible. That's awesome. That's the wonder of Christmas.