

## What Is This Word?

*John 1.1–14*

Sermon at the Eucharist on Christmas Morning 2005

in the Cathedral Church of Christ, Blessed Mary the Virgin, and St Cuthbert of Durham

the Bishop of Durham, Dr N. T. Wright

One of the greatest journalists of the last generation, the late Bernard Levin, described how, when he was a small boy, a great celebrity came to visit his school. The headmaster, thinking perhaps to impress, called the young Levin to the platform in front of the whole school. The celebrity, thinking perhaps to be kind, asked the little boy what he'd had for breakfast.

That was easy, or so it seemed. 'Matzobrei', replied Levin. It's a typical central European Jewish dish, made of egg fried with matzo wafers, brown sugar and cinnamon; Levin's immigrant mother had continued to make it even after years of living in London. It was, to him, a perfectly ordinary word for a perfectly ordinary meal.

The celebrity, ignorant of such cuisine, thinks he must have misheard; he asks the question again. Young Bernard, puzzled now and anxious, gives the same answer. The celebrity looks concerned, and glances at the headmaster. What is this word he's saying? The headmaster, adopting a there-there-little-man tone, asks him once more what he had for breakfast. Now dismayed, not knowing what he's done wrong, and wanting to burst into tears, the boy says once more the only thing he can say, since it's the truth: 'Matzobrei'. An exchange of strange glances on the platform, and the now terrified little boy is sent back to his place. The incident is never referred to again, but it stays in his memory as a horrible ordeal.

The Jewish word spoken to an incomprehending world; the child's word spoken to incomprehending adults; the word for food of which the others know nothing . . . it all feels very Johannine. What is this Word? 'In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was made flesh.' We are so used to it, to the great cadences, the solemn but glad message of the incarnation; and we risk skipping over the incomprehensibility, the oddness, the almost embarrassing strangeness, of the Word. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness didn't comprehend it; the world was made through him but the world didn't know him; he came to his own, and his own didn't receive him. John is saying two things simultaneously in his Prologue (well, two hundred actually, but let's concentrate on two): first, that the incarnation of the eternal Word is the event for which the whole creation has been on tiptoe all along; second, that the whole creation, and even the carefully prepared people of God themselves, are quite unready for this event. Jew and Gentile alike, hearing this strange Word, are casting anxious glances at one another, like the celebrity and the headmaster faced with a little boy telling the truth in a language they don't understand.

That is the puzzle of Christmas. And, to get to its heart, see how it works out in the rest of John's gospel. John's Prologue is designed to stay in the mind and heart throughout the subsequent story. Never again is Jesus himself referred to as the Word; but we are meant to look at each scene, from the call of the first disciples and the changing of water into wine right through to the confrontation with Pilate and the crucifixion and resurrection, and think to ourselves, *this is what it looks like when the Word becomes flesh*. Or, if you like, *look at this man of flesh and learn to see the living God*. But watch what happens as it all plays out. He comes to his own and his own don't receive him. The light shines in the darkness, and though the darkness can't overcome it it has a jolly good try. He speaks the truth, the plain and simple words, like the little boy saying what he had for breakfast, and Caiaphas and Pilate, incomprehending, can't decide whether he's mad or wicked or both, and send him off to his fate.

But, though Jesus is never again referred to as the Word of God, we find the theme transposed, with endless variations. The Living Word speaks living words, and the reaction is the same. 'This is a hard word,' say his followers when he tells them that he is the bread come down from heaven (6.60). 'What is this word?', asks the puzzled crowd in Jerusalem (7.36). 'My word finds no place in you,' says Jesus, 'because you can't hear it' (8.37, 43). 'The word I spoke will be their judge on the last day', he insists (12.48) as the crowds reject him and he knows his hour has come. When Pilate hears the word, says John, he is the more afraid, since the word in question is Jesus' reported claim to be the Son of God (19.8). Unless we recognise this strange, dark strand running through the gospel we will domesticate John's masterpiece (just as we're always in danger of domesticating Christmas), and think it's only about comfort and joy, not also about incomprehension and rejection and darkness and denial and stopping the ears and judgment. Christmas is not about the living God coming to tell us everything's all right. John's gospel isn't about Jesus speaking the truth and everyone saying 'Of course! Why didn't we realise it before?' It is about God shining his clear, bright torch into the darkness of our world, our lives, our hearts, our imaginations, and the darkness not comprehending it. It's about God, God-as-a-little-child, speaking the word of truth, and nobody knowing what he's talking about.

There may be somebody here this morning who is aware of that puzzlement, that incomprehension, that sense of a word being spoken which seems as though it ought to mean something but which remains opaque to you. If that's where you are, the good news is that along with this theme of incomprehension and rejection there goes the parallel theme of people hearing and receiving Jesus' words, believing them and discovering, as he says, that they are spirit and life (6.63), breathing into the dry, dead fabric of our being and producing new life, new birth, new creation. 'As many as received him, to them he gave the right to become God's children, who were born not of human will or flesh, but of God'. 'If you abide in my words, you will know the truth and the truth shall set you free' (8.31f.). 'If anyone keeps my words, that person will never see death' (8.51). 'You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you' (15.3). Don't imagine that the world divides naturally into those who can understand what Jesus is saying that those who can't. By ourselves, we none of us can. Jesus is born into a world where everyone is deaf and blind to him and what he's saying; but some, in

fear and trembling, allow his words to challenge, rescue, heal and transform them. That is what's on offer at Christmas; not a better focussed religion for those who already like that sort of thing, but a Word which is incomprehensible in our language but which, when we learn to hear, understand and believe it, will transform our whole selves with its judgment and mercy.

Out of the thousand things which follow directly from this reading of John, I choose three as particularly urgent.

First, John's view of the incarnation, of the Word becoming flesh, strikes at the very root of that liberal denial which characterised mainstream theology thirty years ago and whose long-term effects are with us still. I grew up hearing lectures and sermons which declared that the idea of God becoming human was a category mistake. No human being could actually be divine; Jesus must therefore have been simply a human being, albeit no doubt (the wonderful patronizing pat on the head of the headmaster to the little boy) a very brilliant one. Phew; that's all right then; he points to God but he isn't actually God. And a generation later, but growing straight out of that school of thought, I have had a clergyman writing to me this week to say that the church doesn't know anything for certain, so what's all the fuss about? Remove the enfleshed and speaking Word from the centre of your theology, and gradually the whole thing will unravel until all you're left with is the theological equivalent of the grin on the Cheshire Cat, a relativism whose only moral principle is that there are no moral principles; no words of judgment because nothing is really wrong except saying that things are wrong, no words of mercy because, if you're all right as you are, you don't *need* mercy, merely 'affirmation'.

That's where we are right now; and John's Christmas message issues a sharp and timely reminder to re-learn the difference between mercy and affirmation, between a Jesus who both embodies and speaks God's word of judgment and grace and a home-made Jesus (a *Da Vinci Code* Jesus, if you like) who gives us good advice about discovering who we really are. No wonder John's gospel has been so unfashionable in many circles. There is a fashion in some quarters for speaking about a 'theology of incarnation' and meaning that our task is to discern what God is doing in the world and do it with him. But that is only half the truth, and the wrong half to start with. John's theology of the incarnation is about God's word coming as light into darkness, as a hammer that breaks the rock into pieces, as the fresh word of judgment and mercy. You might as well say that an incarnational missiology is all about discovering what God is saying No to today, and finding out how to say it with him. That was the lesson Barth and Bonhoeffer had to teach in Germany in the 1930s, and it's all too relevant as today's world becomes simultaneously, and at the same points, more liberal and more totalitarian. This Christmas, let's get real, let's get Johannine, and let's listen again to the strange words spoken by the Word made flesh.

Second, John's Prologue by its very structure reaffirms the order of creation at the point where it is being challenged today. John is consciously echoing the first chapter of Genesis: In the beginning God made heaven and earth; in the beginning was the Word. When the Word becomes flesh, heaven and earth are joined together at last, as God

always intended. But the creation story which begins with the bipolarity of heaven and earth reaches its climax in the bipolarity of male and female; and when heaven and earth are joined together in Jesus Christ, the glorious intention for the whole creation is unveiled, reaffirming the creation of male and female in God's image. There is something about the enfleshment of the Word, the point in John 1 which stands in parallel to Genesis 1.26–8, which speaks of creation fulfilled; and in that other great Johannine writing, the Book of Revelation, we see what's going on: Jesus Christ has come as the Bridegroom, the one for whom the Bride has been waiting.

Allow that insight to work its way out. Not for nothing does Jesus' first 'sign' transform a wedding from disaster to triumph. Not for nothing do we find a man and a woman at the foot of the cross. The same incipient gnosticism which says that true religion is about 'discovering who we really are' is all too ready to say that 'who we really are' may have nothing much to do with the way we have been physically created as male or female. Christian ethics, you see, is not about stating, or for that matter bending, a few somewhat arbitrary rules. It is about the redemption of God's good world, his wonderful creation, so that it can be the glorious thing it was made to be. This word is strange, even incomprehensible, in today's culture; but if you have ears, then hear it.

Third, and finally, we return to the meal, the food whose very name is strange, forbidding, even incomprehensible to those outside, but the most natural thing to those who know it. The little child comes out to the front this morning, and speaks to us of the food which he offers us: himself, his own body and blood. It is a hard saying, and those of us who know it well may need to remind ourselves just how hard it is, lest we be dulled by familiarity into supposing that it's easy and undemanding. It isn't. It is the word which judges the world and saves the world, the word now turned into flesh, into *matzo*, passover bread, the bread which is the flesh of the Christchild, given for the life of the world because this flesh is the place where the living Word of God has come to dwell. Listen, this morning, for the incomprehensible word the Child speaks to you. Don't patronize it; don't reject it; don't sentimentalize it; learn the language within which it makes sense. And come to the table to enjoy the breakfast, the breakfast which is himself, the Word made flesh, the life which is our life, our light, our glory.