

GOD'S OWN FLESH

Phil. 2: 1-11; John 1: 1-14;

Now that our Christmas celebrations are coming to an end, it seems a good time to look back and reflect upon what it was all about.

Of course, we all know it was about the birth of Jesus Christ.

It's amazing to think that all over the world, not only in North America, but also all over South America, Europe, the Middle East, much of Africa, the islands of the seas, even much of Asia, including China, hundreds of millions of people were celebrating the birth of Jesus.

But why such an extravagant occasion of praise and rejoicing? Why is our church and our faith so centered upon this humble Jewish man, born into a poor family, in an obscure little corner of the Roman Empire, two thousand years ago?

What makes him so different from all the other great and wonderful people who have lived down through history, and even in our own time?

One skeptical person put it to me this way: Why such a huge birthday party for this one guy?

Let's look at this text from John, chapter one, to throw light on these questions.

We don't know much about the author of the gospel of John.

This is not John the Baptist, not John the disciple, not John of Patmos, author of the book of Revelation. This is another, later John. This gospel is usually dated later than the others, about the end of the first century, some seventy-five years after the death and resurrection events.

This John was certainly a Jew, very knowledgeable about the Hebrew scriptures, but probably a diaspora Jew, that is, one who lived not in Judea, but in a non-Jewish nation, maybe Egypt or Syria.

The Jews were a commercial people, widely spread out, doing business all over the ancient Mediterranean world. Perhaps this John was the son of a prosperous Jewish family doing business in Alexandria or Antioch.

He seems to be well educated; he knows Greek philosophy, and writes a very fine Greek. Perhaps his family sent him to one of the academies, the precursors of the universities that existed in those great ancient cities. We don't know for sure.

You may wonder: If he was Jewish, why did he write in Greek? Well, Greek, since the time of Alexander the Great, some four centuries before Christ, was the most prominent international language of the Mediterranean world.

The Romans, whose language was Latin, were the dominant military and political power, but Greek remained the main language of commerce in that part of that world; also the language of science and philosophy.

That's why not only John, but the whole New Testament, is written in Greek. The first Christians were all Jews, but they wanted to communicate their message to the gentile world. So they wrote in Greek and fashioned their message to appeal to the Greek mind.

The text I've read from John 1 begins with a grand prologue or introduction. John writes a different sort of gospel. He doesn't start with a genealogy of Jesus, or the story of Jesus' birth to Mary and Joseph. No mention of a virgin conception, or a stable, or a star, or shepherds and wise men. Nothing like that at all.

Rather, John launches straight in to what might be seen as a rather abstract discussion of the identity of Jesus. His question: Who is Jesus?

Not that he contradicts the writings of Paul, whose letters are part of our Bible; or the other gospels. They all speak of Jesus in very exalted terms: He's called Rabbi, Teacher, Messiah; but also Son of God, Lord, Saviour – divine titles, normally ascribed to God alone.

But John introduces a new title. For him, Jesus is also "God's Word made flesh."

Let's look at these two terms: "The Word of God," and "flesh".

But let's start with flesh. We all know instinctively what flesh is, because we are flesh.

Body, mind and soul, we humans are flesh. Wonderfully and powerfully made. Beautiful, wonderful, vulnerable flesh. That's what we are. And Jesus of Nazareth too was flesh. He is one of us. One hundred percent human.

Not half man, half God. Not like the hybrid creatures of ancient mythology, half human, half horse; or half goat. No. Jesus is not half human, and half God.

God, after all, is not one among many species. Nobody can be half God.

The oneness of Jesus with God, or his divinity, does not modify or change his humanity, does not turn him into some kind of strange hybrid creature.

Nor is Jesus a divine being who only appears to be human, someone who walks two feet above the ground, who could not suffer or die. That's what some ancient Christians suggested. But No. The church has always rejected that idea.

To put it into up-to-date scientific terms, Jesus shares our human DNA. If we could take a bit of Jesus' saliva and send it to Ancestry.ca, they'd find that he has exactly the same human DNA that we have. They'd also say his ancestry is Jewish.

Speaking scientifically, Jesus of Nazareth is biologically human.

Having in mind our present knowledge of human origins, we have to recognize that Jesus, like us, was a product of the evolutionary process. He shares our animal nature. Like us, he is cousin to the animal kingdom. That makes him 100% human. Both mentally and physically.

Now this is not some new fangled liberal doctrine, not some new fad I'm dreamed up. The New Testament, and also the creeds and councils of the ancient church, all attest that Jesus is truly and fully human. One of us. Our brother.

The true humanity of Jesus has often been neglected or distorted in historic Christianity, but it is in fact a deeply traditional doctrine.

In the New Testament, Jesus is a real human baby, "born of a woman." Don't be deceived by that Christmas carol, "Away in a Manger" which is way off course when it says, "little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." Not true.

You bet he cried. When he was hungry, he howled for his mother's breast. When he needed his swaddling clothes changed, he yelled about it. Get me out of this mess. When he was six or seven months, we can be sure that little Jesus made strange to people he didn't know, and clung to his mother in fear.

He was an ordinary baby.

We're told in the gospel of Luke that Jesus "grew in stature." In other words, he grew up like everyone else, went through all the normal physical and psychological stages of childhood and adolescence.

He had to learn Aramaic, his mother tongue; he probably went to a synagogue school, learned to read, maybe learned a little math, learned the Hebrew Bible.

He must have been naughty, a bit mischievous at times. Don't imagine him as some perfect little angel.

We have a glimpse of him at the age of twelve, when he got lost at the time of the Passover. A precocious boy, to be sure, questioning the rabbis in the temple, showing unusual intelligence and insight.

But nevertheless, a rather thoughtless kid at times, like any other kid, didn't bother to tell his parents where he was going. They were in a panic hunting for him; they were angry and scolded him about it.

He seems to have learned the trade of his father, a carpenter. We can imagine him developing calloused hands and strong arms.

We know that, as an adult, he could get hungry and thirsty, he would get tired, needed to rest, he could be lonely and discouraged, he longed for friends and company, he was tempted to do the wrong thing. He wept when a friend had died.

We should not think of him as morally flawless from day one. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that he "learned obedience by what he suffered."

In other words, he developed and grew spiritually, as well as physically and mentally.

If he is really 'flesh', as John tells us, he must have experienced sexual desire. As a human being, he had to be one sex or the other, and we know he was male, circumcised on the eighth day, like all other little Jewish boys.

We can assume that as an adolescent boy, he began to enjoy the sight of the opposite sex.

Think of him as a teenager and a young man in the carpentry business, doing business, selling his wares, making a living. As the eldest son, helping to support the family.

After all, he was quite a mature man, already thirty years old, when the Spirit descended upon him, he received a call, when baptized by John the Baptist, and began his work as an itinerant preacher and healer.

We occasionally get glimpses of his humour in the gospels. Imagine him laughing. Think of him as a likable person; not always serious. People liked him, loved him.

Apparently he liked company, enjoyed eating with disreputable people. His enemies accused him of eating and drinking too much. Evidently he relished his food and drink. Yes, a man of the flesh.

Don't think of him as a stiff, self-righteous, holier-than-thou moralist. Think of him as a tolerant, forgiving person, a non-judgmental person .

He was also passionate. He could get angry, when he saw cruelty and injustice. He could tear a strip off self-righteous scribes and Pharisees, and chased the crooked, cheating money changers out of the temple. This was a guy with guts.

He was a man of his own time and place, limited in his understanding of many things.

He knew nothing of the English language, which didn't exist at that time. Did not know that North America existed.

Jesus of Nazareth knew nothing of modern science, nothing of evolutionary theory, nothing of the vast extent and age of the universe, as we do today.

Never heard of electricity; never knew of computers, or automobiles or airplanes. A man of his own time.

And yes, he suffered, as we suffer, and suffered far more than most of us ever do.

He was critical of established powers. Got in trouble for standing up for the little people. The powerful people, both Jewish and Roman, got rid of him.

And finally he died, apparently in despair, feeling abandoned by God.

If we're going to be Christians, we should know that our Lord, Jesus Christ, really is our brother. We can identify with him. We can follow him, share in his mission, because he is one with us, and we are one with him.

OK. He's a man of flesh.

But none of this explains why all over the world, Jesus' birth is celebrated as an event of "Emmanuel," "God with us."

Something more is being said about Jesus. Going back to our text in John chapter one: John says he is the "Word of God made flesh." What does John mean by "the Word of God?"

When we hear this term ‘Word of God’, we think of the Bible. But when John wrote his gospel, the Bible as we know it, did not exist. It was still being written.

The Word of God, for John, is far greater than the Bible.

John opens with the words “In the beginning.” Which echoes the first words of the book of Genesis: “In the beginning, God created.”

John says, “In the beginning was the Word.”

You’ll remember that in Genesis 1, we hear that God creates by speaking: “God said: Let there be light, and there was light.” God’s Word is a power that comes forth from God, and that power is God’s own self.

Besides that, in other biblical Hebrew texts, God’s Word speaks to the people through the prophets. We frequently hear: “God’s Word came to Amos,” or “The Word of God came to Jeremiah.”

The prophets then speak God’s Word to the people. God’s Word through the prophets commands them, summons them to justice and love, but also offers comfort and hope to the people.

So, John’s idea of the Word of God comes very much from the Old Testament. These ideas would make sense to a Jewish listener or reader of that time.

But John wants to communicate not only to Jews, but to his Greek speaking audience. As a diaspora Jew, he wants to communicate his gospel in terms that they understand.

So he adopts a familiar Greek idea: It’s the Logos. In the original Greek, John 1, verse 1 reads: “In the beginning was the Logos.”

Now this Greek word “Logos” was widely used in ancient Greek philosophy, and lots of people knew what it meant.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus, five centuries before Christ, spoke of the Logos as a divine presence in the world. Later, the Stoic philosophers spoke of the Logos as the source of all reason and order.

The Logos creates order. According to these Greek philosophers, what we would call the laws of nature are the work of the Logos. The intelligence inherent in all animals and plants, and human beings, comes from the Logos.

The beauty of the world comes from the Logos. Our English word ‘logic’ comes from the Greek Logos. The logic of mathematics comes from the Logos.

We might say the Logos is the eternal mind of God operating throughout the world.

Now the author of the gospel of John puts together the Hebrew belief in the Word of God, with the Greek idea of the Logos.

He says, In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God.

And then he breaks through with the stunning, scandalous claim that the Logos of God has become flesh in Jesus the Christ: “The Logos became flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld his glory.”

He’s making this apparently foolish claim that the Logos, was uniquely present and at work in Jesus.

So God who is Spirit, enters into, and identifies utterly, with a human being of flesh.

Jesus shows us Who God is.

Without interfering in any way with his real humanity, God becomes transparent through Jesus. God’s love, God’s will for the world, God’s suffering with the world, are made known in Jesus.

That’s what John means when he says, “we have beheld his glory.”

Jesus’ followers were awestruck by him. This was more than hero worship, more than ordinary admiration for a great man. This was reverence, even worship.

They saw that Jesus’ solidarity with the poor, with the sick and disabled, is God’s own solidarity with them. Jesus’ suffering is God’s own suffering; Jesus’ flesh is God’s own flesh.

God was in Christ, reaching out to the world with love and grace.

Therefore, Jesus’ forgiveness is God’s own forgiveness.

Finally, of course, it was the resurrection of Jesus, his victory over death, that convinced them that Jesus was Lord. The Lord of life must also be the Lord over death.

As John says, we have “beheld his glory.” He was glorious in his teaching and deeds. He was glorious in his courageous death. And finally he was glorious in his resurrection from the dead.

In all of this Jesus was 100 per cent human, and 100 per cent divine!

No wonder that Jesus appeals to millions all over the world. No wonder that hundreds of millions of people love him, and celebrate his birth so extravagantly at Christmas time.

He presents us with a mighty moral challenge to follow him in ways of love and justice. He has become our true King, our true authority in life and death. He takes precedence over all human authorities.

His authority is higher than that of the Emperor of Rome. Higher than any President or Prime Minister, or CEO. He liberates us from obedience to all tyrannical authorities.

And he offers forgiveness and hope to ordinary, sinful mortals like you and me.

That is why, in the letter to the Philippians, Paul declares that “God has highly exalted him, and given him a name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Now, to God our Creator, and Jesus our brother, and the Holy Spirit of God among us, be all praise and glory, now and forever. Amen.

Hymn: VU 56 “Jesus Our Brother, kind and good”

