

Texts: Jeremiah 31:7-14 and John 1:1-18

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Place: MUC

## **Introduction**

*“The Word became flesh and made himself at home among us.”*

If we pause and reflect on these eleven words from John we might discover how profound this sentence is. The God we worship became flesh. God honoured the human body by making himself known to us in a human body. As our gospel reading said, no one has seen God in any other way than in the body of Jesus the Son.

When God set out to make himself known to us as fully as possible, God came to us in a human body. *“The Word became flesh and made himself at home among us.”*

I believe one of the toughest choices we will make in our faith is to really take the humanity of Jesus seriously. This is the challenge of this week in the Lectionary. As we worship the incarnate God, may we also encounter the human Jesus this week.

## **Let us pray...**

You and I know that what we have in the gospel accounts of the story of Jesus is not a set of simple reports of what happened. Rather they are interpreted reports, or reflections on what happened and what it meant, written from the perspective of committed believers who have already seen Jesus crucified and experienced his risen presence and power in their lives. So, this primary witness that we have in the biblical accounts is not a bald account of the historical facts, but rather some of the early attempts to make sense of the historical facts — four early attempts that the church found to be particularly effective in explaining and deepening their experience of the living Christ.

Now for the connection to the Christmas season. When the gospel writers are trying to make sense of their experience of Jesus, the real question they are asking is “who is this person?” And one of the ways of attempting to answer a who-is-this type question is to try to explain his origins. “Who is this person?” “Well, you need to understand where he came from. He was born....”

And thus we have the nativity stories. The nativity stories then must be understood as part of the early church’s attempts to make sense of the life story of Jesus in light of their ongoing experience of his living presence and resurrection power.

And one of the things we notice when we put the four gospels alongside each other, is that their attempts to explain their experience of Christ have something in common with our attempts: the further you go and the more you think about it, the bigger the question gets and the more cosmic in scale the explanations become.

Let me show you what I mean from the gospel accounts.

The first of the gospels written, almost without doubt, was Mark’s. And Mark’s gospel has no nativity stories. Mark shows no interest in the birth or childhood of Jesus. Mark begins with the story of Jesus being baptised by John. Presumably, when Mark wrote, the attempts to explain Jesus in terms of his origins had only gone as far as looking at the religious movement that he emerged from. To Mark, Jesus was a person who was nothing out of the ordinary until he was uniquely claimed and anointed by God at his baptism. It was this moment of life-conversion for the adult Jesus that explained the origin of this unprecedented fusion of humanity and divinity.

Perhaps a couple of decades later, the next two gospels were written: Matthew and Luke. With another couple of decades of reflection, the questions have gotten bigger. As the church has continued to live in union with the risen Christ and reflect on the stories of Jesus in light of their experience, they are continuing to ask “Who was this man?”

And specifically they are asking, “Could this really have been someone who was no different to anyone else until a moment of conversion at his baptism?” And pretty much universally they are answering that question, “No! there must be more to it than that.” And so Matthew and Luke push their explanations back beyond the baptism. Since we have concluded that Jesus was both truly human and truly God, surely the explanation must go back to his conception and birth. So in Matthew and Luke’s accounts, we have attempts to explain the uniqueness of Jesus by reference to the unique circumstances of his conception and birth.

The gospel reading, we heard this morning was the beginning of the last gospel written: the gospel according to John. It was written perhaps a couple of decades later again, and so reflects the fruits of much longer contemplation on the relationship between their present experience of the risen Christ and the past stories of the life and death of Jesus.

By this time the question has pushed back further still. By now the church is asking, “Given that it is now clear to us that Christ’s life was the primary self-revelation of God, and that in his resurrection, a new creation has begun; is it really possible that he didn’t exist and had no part in God’s creative and redemptive work until just a century ago?”

And increasingly their answer was “No!” And so, as the church enters its second century, we get John summarising its beliefs about how the origins of Jesus can best be explained: *At the very start, there was one who is called the Word. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. From day one, God and the Word were inseparable, and it was through the Word that everything was created.*

Let’s remember each year when we focus our thinking and our prayer around the theme of God’s incarnation in Jesus, we are doing far more than celebrating a birthday.

We are exploring and celebrating some of the deepest mysteries of God and of the nature of God’s relationship to our world. Believe it or not the longer we do that, and more we

allow our unfolding experience of the risen Christ to shape our thinking and sink deep roots into our hearts, the bigger our thinking will get and the wider our recognition of its implications will become. And if we continue to think and discuss and pray, that growth will go on all through our lives.

As we reflect, year by year, on this awesome teaching, the implications of God becoming flesh and rolling out his swag in our midst will continue to grow within us and transform us through and through. In Christ we have seen the full glory of God, like father, like son; warm and generous to a fault, solid and true to the core. As we continue to reflect on the connections between our experience of life in Christ and the witness we hear in the reading of the scriptures, we will indeed be listening for the Word of God and allowing that Word to continue to take flesh in us.

For as John puts it, the fact that no one has ever seen what God looks like is no obstacle to getting to know God; for the one who is closest to God's heart, the one and only Son, has put God within reach of us all.

In the Christmas season, it is easy for us turn God into a cosmic Santa Claus who dispatches toy upon toy. This tendency is not what John has in mind. In chapter one, verses 14, 16, and 17, "we" are reminded of how God has chosen to disclose God's self in flesh and blood so that we, who are flesh and blood, might recognize ourselves as children of God.

### **Jesus–Wisdom**

John identifies that which has become flesh and blood as the "Word." Here he draws on language closely associated with the figure 'Wisdom'. In a first century CE Jewish text, the Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom is described as "she who knows your [God's] works and was present when you made the world." Jesus, like Wisdom, is described in John's Gospel as the one through whom the world came into being (1:3, 10; see also Proverbs 8:22-31) and who does the works of God (5:36; 10:32; 14:10). John also draws on the

language of “Wisdom” found in another Jewish text from the second century BCE, Sirach. Here, Wisdom is said to make her dwelling (*kataskēnō*) in Jacob (Sirach 24:8). John uses the same verb root (from *skēnoō*) in 1:14. A more literal translation might render this verse, “The Word pitched its tent among us,” giving the phrase a wonderfully earthy feel. This alternate translation also provides a sense of God’s intentionality.

God has chosen this place, a place identified not by physical characteristics or geographic boundaries, but by reference to relationship (“among us”).

*“The Word became flesh and made himself at home among us.”*

*On the first Sunday of 2022 we are reminded once again that, “The Word became flesh and lived among us. “God is not up there or watching us from the distant. The portrait of God and Jesus in the prologue to John offers a grand cosmic vision of an unfolding history. At Christmas the Word of God who would give us life has become flesh.*

How are we to respond in a way that becomes flesh?

I don’t know what all the answers are for us, because there is no one set of answers and what’s right for us will only emerge as we commit ourselves to prayerfully seeking the will of God together.

From John we know that God’s intention is to become like the stuff of this world and live in specific moments in our world, in our communities, in our lives. The challenge that I hear to contemporary Christians in this vision of the incarnation is to talk a little less and let their words take on some flesh and skin and live in the world.

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God’s incarnational intention is that God’s story gets lived out in recognizable ways in the world. Not only over some grand cosmic saga, but also in the way we engage the specific

broken places in our communities and even in the forgettable interactions we have with our neighbours.

*“The Word became flesh and made himself at home among us.”*

God’s incarnational intention is that God’s presence becomes unmistakable in our midst because the faithful have put their bodies, and not just their language, into effect for what they believe to be true.

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God’s incarnational intention is that the faithful enact our hope in liturgy and protest. That we embody God’s justice and love in the world, not just by speaking it, but by living it out. Not through testing philosophical decrees, against the long arc of history, nor through theological debates but by showing up in the world we have, as the people we are, to make God into flesh once again.

On the second day of 2022 and the first Sunday of 2022 John tells us that God showed up.

*“The Word became flesh and made himself at home among us.”* My hope for Manningham Uniting church in 2022 is that the God who has showed up will continue to show up through us.

**Benediction:**

Friends I want to invite you to pause for a moment so that we can see, feel, touch and know the Divine ONE we call God, who comes to us in the rhythm of our breath and in the guise of a baby.

The ONE we seek has come amongst us. The one who has the power to save us, the One who lies at the very heart of reality, the One we call God, lives and breathes in, with, through, and beyond us.

Follow that Light where-ever that Light may lead us, for there is Wisdom in the Stars just as surely as there is Wisdom in you. May the Light of Christ, the love of God, and the wisdom of the Spirit, open you to the Wisdom of Life that is to be found all around us. **Amen.**