

Prologue and Sermon for 14th December 2025 – Carol Service

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

John 1:1-14

Prologue

So here we are, right in the middle of Advent – two weeks in and just under two weeks to go until the wonderful celebration of Christmas Day. The longest night is coming in a week's time, and yet today is actually the day with the earliest sunset. Yes, as of tomorrow, the sunset starts getting later again; brighter evenings are on their way back! Meanwhile our frantic Christmas preparations reach fever pitch, and we may find that our eager waiting to celebrate the birth of Jesus turns into a desperate wish for just a little more time. As Provost Kelvin has said, he always wishes Advent were a week longer and Lent a week shorter, and I do agree. But maybe that's the key thing about waiting – it's never comfortable however long it lasts.

Advent is also a weird sort of waiting, since the anticipated birth of Jesus the Messiah has long since happened, and yet we continue to wait for it every year, but as the Welsh poet and priest R.S. Thomas so memorably wrote in his poem Kneeling, “The Meaning is in the Waiting.” It is in the waiting that we find the mystery, magic, and awe of anticipation. In the waiting, we see and hear things with new eyes and ears, as if for the first time. In the waiting, we pay attention to things we may normally have walked past unnoticed. Sometimes we may even catch a glimpse of the old magic of childhood Christmas – just a glimpse – but enough to lift our hearts and make us smile with fond memory. The truth is, waiting with hope is one of the key things that makes us human.

So, as we listen to this old story of Jesus' birth once again, I invite you to listen intently to the longings of your own heart. What is it that you are most waiting

and yearning for, in this darkest month of the year. What is your deepest prayer to the God who is born in Jesus and shares in our struggle and our pain?

Sermon

There's no question that the story of the birth of Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem is a profoundly moving one, regardless of how historically accurate it may or may not be. We have wonderful characters, like the simple-hearted but socially-outcast shepherds, the glorious choirs of angels, the patiently watching animals who sometimes seem to know what's going on better than the humans, the magi with gifts from the east following the star, and the selfish and fearful king Herod also seeking baby Jesus but for all the wrong reasons.

But it's only in John's gospel, written decades later than the other three, that we are given a much more profound revelation of the nature of Jesus in a passage that would cause devout monks and nuns to plunge to their knees as John pronounces: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory." It is one of the key passages that led the Church to eventually conclude that Jesus was more than a wise human teacher, or even a unique sort of prophet, but a human literally embodying God.

For many in the early Church, at least for the first 300 years or so, this was not really a significant part of their faith. Jesus was seen as a very human Messiah who had confounded Jewish expectations by welcoming all peoples and nations into God's kingdom of unconditional love, rather than by becoming a great military leader and throwing off the oppression and occupation of the Romans. For most Christians at that time, Jesus was holy, committed no sins, and was raised from the dead to show that God approved of all that he had said and done. His role now in heaven was as a Mediator between God and the rest of humanity – the firstborn into a new state of being, opening the way for all of the

rest of us to become part of God's family, knowing ourselves loved as sons and daughters rather than as terrified adherents to strict religious rules we could never fully obey. Jesus taught that the righteous are those who love one another come what may, and that religious rules are largely created and enforced by hierarchies and elites that love their positions of authority and power. While the religious leaders certainly accused Jesus of identifying too closely with God, speaking with an authority that only God should possess, they seemed more upset that he was challenging their privilege and criticising their selfishness and hypocrisy.

It was only later that Christians started to look back and wonder if, in fact, Jesus was more than a great human teacher, more than a prophet speaking God's words, teaching God's wisdom, and showing God's love to the poor and the oppressed. For a couple of centuries, the Church was split roughly down the middle, with half believing Jesus was a human being with unique authority and powers granted by God for his mission, and the other half starting to believe that Jesus was not only fully human, but fully divine as well – not just empowered by God, but actually God in human flesh.

Preachers have no proof regarding this Word made flesh. We know it does something to us, this idea that God did not stand far off but – as the prayer goes – “met us in [his] son and brought us home.” Even if Jesus were ‘only’ a holy teacher and wise healer, I’d still love him, and I’d still preach his message of kindness and love, but what if I could countenance even for a moment that Jesus is the divinity that created and sustains the world in love, a God entirely at home in the messiness of material reality, wounded and abused as we all are, outcast and never really understood?

I don’t know how God becomes a man, but I can’t deny that the idea of it adds another level of profound mystery to the Christian faith. Rather than God remaining far off and difficult to relate to, we instead witness God’s love bursting

forth into creation in Jesus Christ, and we can glimpse what God is truly like in words and actions that we can understand.

The early church was abuzz with theologians trying to figure out what all this meant. Irenaeus, an early Church Father said: “The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, through His transcendent love, became what we are, that He might bring us to be what He is Himself”. And another Church father, Athanasius, said bluntly: “The Son of God became man so that we might become God,” meaning that through Jesus Christ, heaven and earth are finally united in love, no longer separated by sin and selfishness, and that this path of love is open to all humanity.

Incredibly, behind the simple, sweet story of the manger, shepherds, angels, sheep and wise men, there’s a God who wants us to know him, who wants us to experience being loved by him, who wants us to be transformed by that love to become like him, in every way that matters. If that is something you want as well, then you’re in the right place, with the right people, at precisely the right time.

Christmas Blessing

May the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the perseverance of the wise men, the obedience of Joseph and Mary and the peace of the Christ-child be yours this Christmas; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. Amen.