

Sermon 20 October 2024 'Actions, not Words.'

1 John 3:18-24 John 1:1-14

The Gospel of John is very different to the other three gospels, and I don't intend to explore that just now. However, I will point out one difference and that is that John does not mention the birth and baptism of Jesus. Instead, he begins with those wonderful words, *'In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God.'* So what does John mean by 'the Word?' To put it simply, he is referring to Jesus. What he is saying is that Jesus has always been part of God, right back to the beginning of creation and even before. This is some statement, to say the least, and we could spend a whole sermon just unpacking that statement.

However, I want to briefly focus on what John says towards the end of our gospel passage: *'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.'* This could well be the most important verse for us in the Bible. This verse expresses the belief on which our religion is founded – that God expresses himself through the person of Christ, and this person reflects the loving nature of God.

The interesting point here is that this loving nature of God as exemplified in the human Jesus is at odds with the vengeful and rather destructive God of the Old Testament. The killing in the Old Testament, apparently at the behest of God, is on a scale that, at times, is difficult to absorb. But we have to understand that rather than being the actions of God, this is actually an understanding, an interpretation of God pre-Christ. Jesus brings us a totally different lens through which we view God. Rather than a God of retribution, we see a God of grace and love.

There is the story of a little girl who was confronted with some of the more bloodthirsty parts of the Old Testament. Her comment was, 'But that happened before God became a Christian.' What a lovely way of viewing it. My answer to that little girl would be, 'Well, yes and no.' You see, what John is telling us when he says, 'In the beginning the Word already existed,' is that our Christian understanding of God is that God has always been a Christian! He is telling us that God was and is and ever will be like Jesus, but it wasn't until Jesus arrived in our world that we have come to understand that.

Jesus gives us a God who has a far more intimate and personal relationship with his people than God as portrayed in the Old Testament. For Jesus, God is Abba, a personal Father. Abba is an Aramaic word that would most closely be translated as 'Daddy.' There is something familiar and caring about that.

There is the story of the housewife who was washing the dishes one day after the children had left for school. She looked at one particular plate. She stared at it for a long time and asked herself, 'How many times have I washed this plate? How many times have I dried it? How many times will I wash and dry it again? I'm tired, in every sense of the word.' She then set down the plate, took off her apron, packed a few of her belongings and left.

Later she called home to tell her husband she was alright but that she couldn't come home in the meantime. From time to time, over the next couple of weeks, she would call home just to see how her husband and children were getting on, and to assure him that she was ok. But she would never tell him where she was.

The husband hired a private detective to search for her, and after picking up a few leads, he tracked her down. Her husband set out immediately to bring her home. When he found the place where she was

staying, he knocked on the door. She opened the door, saw him, and did not say a word. She went into the bedroom, packed her few belongings and silently followed him out to the car. Then, in silence, he drove her home.

Sometime later when the two of them were alone, he finally spoke and asked her, 'Why didn't you come home before? Over the phone I begged you to return? Why didn't you come?' The wife answered, 'I heard your words, but it wasn't until you came for me that I realised how much you cared and how important I was to you.'

There are two hugely important messages for us in that reply from the wife. Firstly, God has always loved and cared for us, we have always been of the utmost importance to him. But for us to understand and comprehend the nature and depth of that love; for us to digest the importance to him of having a deep and meaningful relationship with us, he needed to come for us, which of course he has done in the person of Jesus. He needed to front up to us in person for us to understand him and for us to relate to him. Jesus is the link, Jesus is the key.

The second point is this – notice that she said, 'I heard your words but it wasn't until you came for me...'. My friends, words are all very well, and I guess they are better than nothing, but in the end it is what we do, not what we say, that will determine whether we are genuine or not, that will lead people to believe that we are authentic. Albert Einstein said, '*Setting an example is not the main method of influencing others, it is the only method.*'

Let me remind you of the story of St Francis of Assisi who one day said to one of his young monks, 'Let us go into the town and preach.' The novice, delighted at being singled out to be the companion of the master, was quick to obey. They passed through countless streets, they talked and interacted with countless people, but at no stage did Francis stop to address the crowds. The young man was disappointed, and at the end of the day he said to Francis, 'I thought you were going to preach to the people.'

Francis replied, 'My son, we *have* preached. We have been watched by many people. The way we have interacted with them has been closely observed. That is how we have preached. It is of no use walking anywhere unless we preach everywhere as we walk.'

Someone said, '*I would rather see a sermon than hear one any day. The eye is a better pupil and much sharper than the ear. Fine counsel can confuse me but an example is always clear.*'

Paul puts it like this: '*And you yourself must be an example to them by doing good deeds of every kind. Let everything you do reflect the integrity and seriousness of your teaching.*' Timothy 2:7.

I have said it before but an accusation often levelled at Christians is that we can tend to be a little hypocritical. In other words, we profess to believe in a certain code of conduct but our actions belie that belief. Well, we are human but we do need to be careful that we do not jeopardise our integrity through conduct that is contrary to our faith.

Let me finish with that wonderful verse from our first reading: '*Dear friends, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. Our actions will show that we belong to the truth.*' 1 John:18