John 1:1-14 Sermon During Covid

This morning’s reading is one which we read every Christmas. It gives the cosmic flip-side to the earthy, gritty story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. It is poetic, and rich in its literary structure. It talks of who Jesus is – the Word of God, or in Greek, the divine ‘logos’; who was there, pre-existent, at the creation of the world and through whom all things have come into being. There is no life without the Word of God, and he is a light shining in the darkness which can never be snuffed out. Jesus was rejected by his own people who did not recognise him, and yet some believed and became God’s children.

Shelves of books have been written about these few verses. There is just so much theology packed into such a small piece of text. So today, we’ll do just a little bit of biblical languages and textual analysis in order to highlight another aspect of this rich theology that we might not get to otherwise. Clearly, it’s not the whole story, but it struck me, because the other week when we were talking about the wedding at Cana in Galilee where water was turned into wine, we talked about that miracle as a sign of a new world order where God had returned, in Jesus, to live with his people. In this new world, there is the lavish love of God resulting in the flourishing of his creation. This is one of the themes of John’s Gospel generally – that of a new world, a fresh start – so we’ll look at it a bit this morning.

First then, the new world, and a bit of Hebrew and Greek – what a way to start a new world! Way back at the start of the Bible, the first word is בְּרֵאשִׁ֖ית (beh-reh-sheet) which is the Hebrew word which translates, ‘In the beginning.’ The world was created in the beginning, out of nothing, by a God who existed beforehand. As we know, this world was good and perfect, but then fell into sin with calamitous consequences. God began to rescue his creation through Abraham, Moses, the people of Israel along with the prophets and priests who spoke to the people on behalf of God and made sacrifices for them. The faithfulness of the people was chequered and at various points exiles and judgments were inevitable. But all the while, God did not turn his back on his people and God promised a Messiah, who would bring about God’s return to the people accompanied by their freedom and flourishing.

In the few centuries running up to Jesus arriving on the scene, the final prophets in the Old Testament had finished speaking, but the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek (Koine Greek to be exact). This huge undertaking is thought traditionally to have been done by a group of 70 Jewish scholars, and the resulting translation is therefore known as the Septuagint, or ‘LXX’ for short. This is the version that was mainly used in Jesus’ time and in the time of the New Testament writers. The LXX starts with Genesis (as you would expect) with the Greek words, ‘ἐν ἀρχῇ’ (en arche) which translates, ‘In the beginning.’ This is as you would expect since this is the equivalent translation of the Hebrew.

Why this is important is that the very first line of John’s Gospel which we read this morning reads:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος καὶ ὁ Λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν Θεόν καὶ Θεὸς ἦν ὁ Λόγος

*(literally – In the beginning, was the Word, and the Word was with/towards the God, and God was the Word)*

John begins his account of Jesus’ life with the same words used to describe the beginning of the whole of creation. This is no accident. John knew what he was doing. He is starting again, describing the new creation in terms which affirm Jesus’ pre-existence as God, there at the beginning of the world, and as God’s Word, speaking the whole world into existence. A new world is created at the sound of his voice.

In this, John harks back to the beginning of all things as he begins to present who Jesus is, but he also, just like Mark in his Gospel, deliberately uses the words of the LXX to describe Jesus’ coming. The magnitude of what happens in the Gospels is that of a return to the start. A new world order is birthed. A slate is wiped clean, and there is the chance to begin again.

This new beginning is found in Jesus, who was there at the very beginning, and who comes to bring about a new start. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus brings this new world into being – he heals the sick, creates wine which overflows into celebration, feeds the hungry, cleanses those who are under the influence of evil, raises the dead, and then gives himself as a sacrifice to save his people from their sin, before rising again to show that in this new world, under the rule of the new Kingdom, even death is conquered. A new world has arisen in Jesus, a new beginning.

But the question then becomes one of our place within that new world. In the first creation, Adam and Eve, however we understand them, were placed in a garden. Later, God’s people entered a country flowing with milk and honey. But always, because of sin, the wells dried up, the people were cast out. So what about this new sense of creation?

Here we move from languages to Biblical textual analysis. John’s prologue (John 1:1-18) takes the literary form of a ‘chiasm.’ This is a way of structuring the text which was really common at the time, but is quite odd to us now. We are used to building an argument towards a conclusion at the end. The point is developed until it climaxes at the conclusion. It’s how we talk. It’s what I’m doing even now in this sermon. A chiasm is a defined piece of writing (verses 1-18) which is a series of parallels with a central point in the middle – e.g. A, B, C, B’, C’. In a chiastic structure the really, really important point is the one at the centre of the structure. If you want, you can print out John 1:1-18 and with a highlighter try to work out which are the parallels as you work towards the centre.

Skipping over a load of textual analysis, the centre of the chiasm in John 1 is verse 12: ‘But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.’ This is the key verse. Its immediate surroundings are concerned with those who did not accept Jesus, despite being part of his own native people, and then, on the other side, the affirmation that those who do accept him are born of God, not of human will or means – they are God’s people. In this new world order, it is those who receive Jesus and believe in his name that are God’s children.

This is just like how in the original creation, Adam and Eve were not born of humans, instead they were literally God’s creation – that’s why Luke traces Adam’s genealogy back all the way to God himself. Adam was truly God’s son, not born through the will of humans.

We also know that the Gospels describe how Jesus was born by the action of God, rather than by the action of Joseph. Jesus is truly God, the Son. We’re on very slippery territory here since we’ve already affirmed that the Jesus, the Word, was there at creation, begotten, not created himself. However, keeping things simple for this morning, this affirmation of Jesus as God’s Son, is why Jesus is sometimes known as the second Adam – the one who came to redeem the sinful actions of the first.

In our reading, though, the key verse in the chiastic structure states that through believing in Jesus, we are also made into God’s children. In the economy of the new kingdom and the new creation, we are no longer those who are born of our parents but we are the ones who God has created to believe and worship in this new world. We are those who get to see the glory of Jesus and recognise it.

The world did not know Jesus, but God’s children do. We recognise the glory and the grace and truth of Jesus in the new creation that we inhabit. God’s new kingdom means that the slate is wiped clean and we inhabit a world where God has come to his people, bringing all the blessings and flourishing that Adam and Eve were created for way back at the start. The Messiah is prophesied to bring springs in the deserts, wine to the parties, grain to the mills, sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, freedom to the captive and the oppressed. In the first words of John’s Gospel, we hear that this new world has begun. It is a world where those who recognise Jesus and receive him are the very children of God, created to live with God.

As Christians, we are therefore inhabitants of a different world, a new chapter – the world we see around us is transformed completely. Ours is the task of enjoying this world, just like Adam and Eve in the garden, and in our enjoyment, we worship and bring glory to God. As we saw the other week, though, the purpose of John’s Gospel is that others may see Jesus and believe in him. What good is a world with no-one in it? How selfish would we be to experience a new start, a clean slate, the love of God himself, and then not share it with others? How impossible is it for us who have seen Jesus’ glory, in what he did, what he taught, and in the way he gave himself up for us and how he then rose as a conqueror of death itself – how impossible for us not to be changed by such a story? How sad, if we chose to inhabit the same world as everyone else having glimpsed the joys of living as God’s children!

In Jesus we literally have new birth – a fresh start. We don’t belong in the old world now that we’ve seen Jesus. That world, though the same place geographically, has changed unrecognisably. We now live in the garden of God’s creation, enjoying and glorifying our saviour. To say any less, is to fall into the trap of the old world. We live tasting and anticipating what will become, as we look forward to a future of full glory when Jesus returns and brings with him, not just a conquering of death, but an end to it forever. We look forward to when he brings, not just an abundance at a wedding, but an eternal feast for all time and when he brings not just the healing of a few, but the healing of the nations.

We partially inhabit this now, but we long for the day when it is all we see, as the old melts away and the new is impossible to miss. It is this vision of the new world that is inaugurated through God’s Son come to us as Jesus. As Christians we are either misfits, born of God but living in a world which doesn’t fit any longer, or we are children of God, worshipping and sharing the Good News about the new world through Jesus. Which world is it that each of us lives within?