

Tenets: Week 4. Christ: God with us

John 1: The Word Became Flesh

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Today is the fourth week of our *Tenets* series looking at 10 things every Christian should hold to. Each week our amazing preaching team have been trying to compress and communicate 2000 years of theological thinking and experience into 20-minute portions which is a big challenge - I am so grateful to them! Along with our wonderful home group leaders, they work tirelessly to serve this church with great teaching and inspired insights, and they don't do it for their own honour but because they want to honour the Lord and because they know our beliefs determine our actions as the people of God. But as the New Testament says, they are worthy of a double honour! (1 Tim 5)

We are doing this series to equip us with the essentials of Christian faith because as 1 Peter 3v15 says 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.' And we want to be a church that is brimming over with hope, so much so that people in the community of Weston are drawn to find out what it is about us that is making us so ludicrously excited!

What we often overlook about that encouragement in 1 Peter to 'be prepared to share the reason for our hope' is that the verse actually starts with the secret to getting ourselves fully prepared:

15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord.

Revering Jesus Christ as Lord in our hearts is taking us to the keystone of our hope and the central Tenets of our faith. Our Tenet this week is *Jesus Christ is God with us*. In Theology this is called *Christology* – the study of Christ - but as Peter points out, it's not just what is in our heads that's important so much as what's in our hearts that makes all the difference.

In the early church the word for *Lord* (κύριος) was the main title that made Christianity distinctive. It distinguished Jesus from ordinary human leaders. It was a politically charged title in that every citizen was expected to say 'Caesar is Lord', but more than that, it was also the word that the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, used to translate *Adonai*, which was often used as an alternate reference to YHWH.

When Thomas fell at the feet of Jesus to worship him, John 20v28 tells us he made the ultimate declaration of faith: 'My Lord and my God!' My *kyrios* and my *Theos*.

That would be a scandalous and earth shattering for any respectable Jew. It amounted to total blasphemy in the eyes of many and a shocking statement for someone who has been taught from a very young age 'hear O Israel, the Lord is One' and the first commandment is you shall have no other Gods before me.

No wonder Paul describes declaring Jesus is Lord as a stumbling block to Jews. But equally he says it often seems like foolishness to Gentiles too.

I remember talking about Christian faith with one of the company directors back when I worked at TBS Engineering in Cheltenham. We were inspecting a machine out on the shop floor when he turned to me and said 'Tom, Christianity just doesn't make sense to me. It's just too human. If God was really God he wouldn't just come down to earth and appear as a mere man, he would do something much more extraordinary.'

Well, we can see how it may appear foolish to some, and scandalous to others, but the central Tenet of Christian faith is what it says in verse 14 of our reading from John's Gospel: God did indeed appear as a human being and *made his dwelling among us*. It is a massive claim.

When you do stop to think about it, the incarnation of Christ can be a hard thing to get your head round. People like my director would find it easier if God were indeed so transcendent and other-worldly that we are just left alone, never to be confronted by his presence or challenged to respond. We could just carry on as master of our own little corners of creation. And yet, the irony is that we also have to admit that in each of us there is also a nagging yearning for connection and belonging. As experiments have shown, human beings actually need love, care and kindness to survive. Once we accept we are inherently relational, then perhaps we have to also accept that there must be a reason that we are more than creatures of instinct. The concept of survival of the fittest just doesn't cut it with our sense of purpose and meaning. We are made relational because we are made in the image of God.

Well, the coming of Jesus Christ is the ultimate expression of God's desire for relationship. Heartfelt love expressed in everyday words, actions, thoughts and prayers are the highest values in the universe.

That is why John opens his Gospel with cosmic language, with the Word, the Logos of God before time, creating life and light, but soon drills down to what really matters to humanity – our relationship with God as a Father to his Children. ¹² *Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*

The name Jesus itself means 'Yahweh saves' and Matthew's gospel tells us that his name indicates his mission: 'you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins'. As Emma and Ruth shared last week, sin is a problem because it not only destroys our lives but because it becomes a relational barrier between us and our heavenly Father.

Matthew bookends his Gospel with another relational name for Jesus: *Emmanuel*. In his opening chapter we are told that Jesus coming fulfilled the words of Isaiah that ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). The name 'Emmanuel' does not appear elsewhere in the New Testament, but Jesus concludes his ministry on earth in Matthew 28:20 by saying "Behold I am with you always, even unto the end of the age".

The idea of God choosing to become a relational human being has been one of the central debates of Christian theology over the centuries. Just exactly how and why did God do that? Many people find it distasteful to think of God experiencing the messiness of everyday life. The bloody mess of birth, awkward growth and development, bodily functions, tiredness and fatigue, joy and pain, anger and compassion. In the early centuries of the church some people couldn't cope with this and tried to assert that Jesus was not human at all, but was just some divine apparition (Docetism).

It took nearly 5 centuries and various other suggestions such as *Adoptionism* which held that Jesus was an ordinary human being who was somehow endowed with extra divinity at his baptism, or Arianism which suggested Jesus was created and sent by God the Father (which is still believed by some sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses today), before eventually in 451 the Council of Chalcedon nailed the language for what they called the *hypostatic union* describing Jesus as truly God and truly man, united in the same essence as God and coeternal with Him.

During his life and ministry on earth, Jesus chose to empty himself of his glory and divine privilege. Paul wrote in Philippians 2:7 that *he made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant* to demonstrate the perfect human life with the power of the Holy Spirit, in spite all the trials and temptations he faced.

Jesus' timeless divine nature was fully unveiled on one spectacular occasion during his life on earth. He took his closest friends Peter, James and John up to a high mountain and there he was transfigured before them.



Matthew 17 says His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. He stood talking to Moses and Elijah, symbolising the Old Testament law and prophets. Peter was dazed and confused and wanted to capture the moment somehow – the only think he could think of was perhaps putting up tents, which was ridiculous as they were up a remote mountain. He was simply overwhelmed.

And that's the point. If God turned up in his true glory we would be overwhelmed, afraid and confused. We would be reduced to gibbering wrecks. We would have no choice but to cower before him, covering ourselves out of fear of exposure for the selfishness in our hearts and the human fallibility.

But out of the Lord's great love for us we are not consumed. John 1 verse 14 concludes *We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

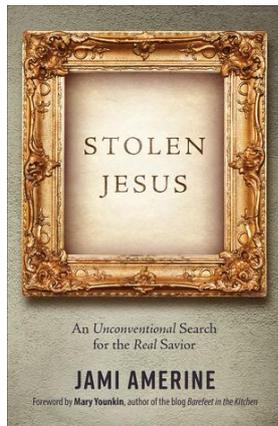
The fact that Jesus came as fully human yet fully divine was to show us his glory at a pace we can handle. Truth without grace would turn us to toast, but Jesus came full of Grace and Truth – and I think John wrote it in that order for a reason. Grace is what makes Christianity the greatest hope of all humanity. Grace is the reason we can receive forgiveness and be reconciled to God. Grace is the most beautiful word in the English language.

Jesus paid the price for giving us Grace with his life. He died on the cross so that the sin that separates us from God would be defeated and we can be reconciled to God. But the choice is ours whether to step into the light and receive that Grace or whether we continue to hide in the shadows trying to sort ourselves out.

Grace doesn't mean that we somehow get away with it. It means that Jesus came to be *God with us* so we can walk with him again, looking to him for guidance to get it right. If we read the Gospels and indeed the whole Bible as Jesus' biography, we can see it contains all we need for salvation and Godly living.

The author and speaker Jami Amerine confessed that when she was young teenager she stole a portrait of Jesus from her local YMCA. She stuck it on her mantle piece as a trophy.

But it was as she kept looking at it that she began to ponder who the real Jesus was and whether there might be more to him than gaudy iconic pictures or festive figurines.



Jami set about a quest to strip back all her preconceived notions, to stop trying to fit Him into any particular box. She knew there is a lot of cultural noise, religious and political assertions that marr His genuine character. She ended up writing a book called 'Stolen Jesus'.

She says: 'If you have never met him, I am honoured to introduce you to him. But first, lay down every portrayal of Him that has hurt you, lied to you, misled you or betrayed you, and let's separate those counterfeit Christs from the one who literally died for you...



When I finally fell into the loving arms of the real Jesus, I began a genuine relationship with the Saviour of the world—the One who died for me. He is everything He promised and so much more.'

So the question for us this morning is this: Is there a danger that the real Jesus being stolen from under our nose? Is our culture or ideology stealing him away or even worse leave us with a counterfeit Christ?

The answer is to come to him again, the God of the Gospels with an open heart and an open mind.

In your hearts revere Christ as Lord,

Then you will be prepared to give an answer for the hope you have – but do this will gentleness and respect, just like Christ Jesus did when he came to be *God with us*, full of Grace and Truth.