

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Lord

A man from a poor country who had to work hard with his hands for a pittance, a hungry man who did not know where his next meal was coming from, a refugee, and a man condemned for a crime he did not commit all met together one day and asked themselves where God was when they needed Him. "It's alright for Him up there in heaven in majesty and glory," said one, "He should try living down here and suffering like us!" At that moment a voice came from heaven and said, "I already have!" This is the really amazing claim that Christianity makes which Judaism, Islam, and every other faith on earth does not make. That the man Jesus who lived and died in Palestine around 2000 years ago was, and is, in some mysterious sense, God come down to us and living our life alongside of us. But what does it mean to say that? As usual, the Gospel of John puts it most succinctly:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." John 1: 14

John is here saying three things:

1. The Word is made flesh

"The Word". This is the Word that "was in the beginning with God" and "was God" in the first verse of John's Gospel. To the Greeks this phrase meant the "divine spark" that existed in all people, or simply "reason, logic". To Jews it meant the powerful message of God through the prophets, or God's law. It called to mind the notion of the Wisdom of God that was there at creation and was God's master builder. And here John says this word is made flesh.

"Made flesh" is deliberate. The first century world was awash with stories about gods who *appeared* in the form of human beings or animals, but they never *were* human or animal. They always had supernormal powers not available to humans, and special privileges. In fact, this statement would have appeared blasphemous to many. God was spirit. Humans were material. And spirit and matter could not mix. Jesus could be God, but not human. Or human and not God. But John, and Christianity in general, says he is both. He does not merely come "in the appearance of flesh". He *becomes* flesh. He is just the same as us. He lived on earth under just the same conditions and terms that we do. But what about his miracles? Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." Luke makes clear that the Holy Spirit descended upon Christ to equip Him for ministry. But in "Volume 2" of his work (normally called "Acts"), he shows the same power descending upon the apostles. And he goes on to show the apostles performing just the same kind of miracles Jesus performed. The power available to the earthly Jesus is available to all.

This is important. God lived alongside us, shared our human experience and our human nature, and when he rose to life again and ascended to the Father

(see “he ascended into heaven”), he took our human nature with him into heaven – into the very heart of God. He is still alongside us. He still goes through all our experiences with us. He still suffers with us. But He also shows us what God is like in a way we can understand – in a human way. He shows us, by his example, the way God wants us to live. And He shows us, by His example that it can be done! The Word became flesh.

2. He pitched his tent among us

Did you know God was keen on camping? He always seems to enjoy living in tents. The “house of God” during Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness, and in their early days in Canaan up to the time of Solomon, was – a tent! Granted, the “tabernacle” (a word derived from the Latin for “tent”) was an elaborate tent – with gold fittings and expensive hangings. But it was a tent. And in the verse from John’s gospel quoted at the beginning of this piece, “made his dwelling among us” literally means “pitched his tent among us”. When the Son of God came to earth, he did not live in a palace, but in a tent! Not literally, of course. But the point is made that Jesus lived humbly and simply, and that he lived a highly mobile – not to say rootless- existence. He was always on the move, spreading his message to all the people he could. And even now, He is with all of us, wherever we are or wherever we go, always leading us on to where God wants us to be next. Always leading us “from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3: 18). We can never be satisfied with ourselves as we are. God is always calling us to greater heights of holiness, until we reach the point where we are “conformed to the image of His Son” – in other words, totally Christlike.

3. We have seen His glory

Glory in a tent! How many of us have experienced that! More typically our memories of tents are of inconvenience, discomfort, and (very often) rain!! But here John says “he pitched his tent among us” and then goes on to say “we have seen His glory”! Even while he is “living in a tent”, his glory can be seen! In fact, this kind of paradox is typical of John’s Gospel. In John chapter 12, Jesus says, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” And then John explains, “He said this to show the kind of death he was to die.” John grasped that it is precisely when Jesus is crucified that he is exalted above the world, because it is then He wins his greatest victory over the forces of darkness. And it is precisely in the humility of Jesus’ human form, and especially in the humiliation of his ignominious death, that his glory is seen. Earlier in the same speech from John 12, Jesus says, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified”. And in the context of what follows, it is obvious that Jesus means that the hour has come for him to die. His glory is seen in humility, in humiliation, in death. Because there it is that God’s love is shown so powerfully, and where that love wins its finest victory.

Can we see the glory of God in a tent? I did, actually. It was in a tent (admittedly a very big one!) that I gave my life to Christ in the course of an Anniversary Rally meeting at Cliff College on Whit Monday 1966. Can you see Jesus glory in the tent of his earthly life, in the tent of your own humble existence? If you can see, and believe, you too can glimpse God’s glory pitching his tent in your life: living alongside of you, working with you and

around you in all things. And you will know the eternal life of God now in this present, and in the world to come.