

## **Born of God**

In the traditional service of lessons and carols, there are nine lessons – bible readings – and the first eight of those readings follow the story of God’s relationship with people from their first disobedience in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8-15), to Jesus’ arrival in history in Bethlehem and people worshipping him (Luke 2, Matthew 2). The ninth reading, though is an oddity – it’s the first fourteen verses of John’s gospel – which begin “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1).

The ninth reading doesn’t really fit in with the images of the holy family, shepherds, angels and wise men that we tend to focus on at Christmas time. The reading from John steps back from history, and presents Jesus in the bigger context of eternity – he was with God in the beginning, he brought light and life to mankind, John testified to who he was, people rejected him, but to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

The ninth reading ends with the summary of Christmas - 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.

Our bible reading from John’s gospel began with the last few verses from that ninth reading, beginning with “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him”. (John 1:10)

Think about that: Jesus, God the Son, entered the world, and the people – overwhelmingly – did not recognise who he was or how important he was. Sure, there were some shepherds, who were told by an angel what had happened, and come to worship him, and there were some wise men from a far off country who had seen his star rise, and came to worship him. Mary and Joseph and a handful of others knew there was something special about him, too, but, overwhelmingly, Jesus was just another child born in another small town in Judea.

As he began his ministry, he attracted a following, of course, but people were still uncertain of who Jesus was. Most of his followers would later turn away from him. As John says, “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.” He was crucified with common criminals – he was mocked and scorned.

We can look around us at the world today and see that Jesus is still mocked and scorned. Some people will have some good things to say about Jesus’ teaching, but not have any time for who he was or who he is.

But... John tells us that “to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”. (1:12)

In our modern world, we hear about ‘rights’ a lot, and the term can easily become watered down, but here, John uses it profoundly. If you do receive Jesus, if you believe in his name (put our faith in him, trust him), then you have the right to become a child of God – it’s a certainty – if you do trust in him, then you become a child of God.

And just like the term ‘rights’ gets watered down, so does the term ‘children of God’, but if we are God’s children, then God is our father, and we can have a parent-child relationship with God.

John explains that this is a unique relationship: [we become] “children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God”. (1:13)

It reflects what Jesus says in that famous conversation with Nicodemus in John chapter 3 – “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born from above/born again”. (John 3:3)

The first section of today’s reading, like the ninth lesson of the service of Lessons and Carols ends with verse 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.”

But our reading today didn’t end there, and John (the gospel writer) goes on to link who Jesus is with John (the Baptist)’s testimony about him: He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”

We can easily forget how important John the Baptist was – he’d appeared in the wilderness near the Jordan River, preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and he’d attracted huge crowds to hear him, and be baptised by him – Mark’s gospel tells us “The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” (Mark 1:5)

John was huge in Judea – and so it made sense to many of the people that John might have been the one that they’d been waiting for – the Messiah, the Christ, who would restore the nation to what it had been in the time of King David – but John the Baptist made it clear that he wasn’t, when he said “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:7-8)

Or as John (the gospel writer) reports John the Baptist’s testimony, “He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.”

In verse 16, John tells us, “Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given,” which is a bit hard to follow – if we receive grace out of his fullness, do we lose the grace we already had? And if that’s the case, where did that original grace come from? If this stumps you, don’t worry, you’re in good company: Over the last week, I’ve read many commentaries and sermons about the first chapter of John, and this verse is the one most commonly skipped over.

But if we read verse 16 along with verse 17, it becomes clearer – because John adds “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” God saved the people when they were enslaved in Egypt, and God gave them the law through Moses to show the people how they should live in relationship with each other and with God. Jesus says in conversation with the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4, “...for salvation is from the Jews.”

God’s law was a way to relationship with God, but it wasn’t effective – not because of the law itself, not because of God, but because of people: As Paul says in his letter to the Romans (3:23), all have sinned and fallen short.

And so God sent Jesus. Grace in place of grace (of the law) already given. Salvation not by following a set of rules, but by following a person.

Our reading concluded with verse 18, which profoundly declares:

<sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

John says that no one has ever seen God, and yet there are references to people in the Old Testament seeing God – Moses encountered God ‘face to face’ in Exodus 33:11, Jacob (Genesis 32:30) called the place Peniel for he said he had seen God face to face there and Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-5) in the year King Uzziah died had a vision of God in the temple.

But if we read those references in context, we find the witnesses to not fully see God – Moses may have spoken with God person to person, but it was not literally ‘face to face’ – we read in Exodus 33:20 that God said to Moses ‘you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.’.

Jacob’s encounter with God was certainly a physical one, and we read that he literally ‘wrestled with God’... but it was a strange encounter where the full glory of God certainly wasn’t revealed.

And Isaiah didn’t see God’s face, merely his train – the edge of his robe – in the temple. He did glimpse God’s glory, holiness, and majesty – but not God’s wholeness.

John tells us that no one has ever seen God... but the one and only Son has. In chapter 14:8-9 of John’s gospel, the disciple Philip asks Jesus, ‘Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.’ And Jesus responds, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”

Paul later confirms this idea in his letter to the Colossians 1:15, where he writes, “The Son is the image of the invisible God.”

It is only through Jesus that we can fully know God. He is, as he says in John 14:6, the way and the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through him.

Where does all of this leave us, though? At Christmas we often focus on that wonderful summary in verse 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,” but I want to suggest that today, in the context of it being the first Sunday of the new calendar year, our focus should be on the earlier verses that tell us “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

If we choose to follow Jesus, if we have received him into our hearts and into our lives, we get to be children of God – part of God’s family and God’s kingdom. That is our right as followers of Jesus – it’s a certainty for us. And it’s not dependant on human actions or decisions or being good or being pious or whatever, but it’s through God’s grace, shown for us in Jesus – in his death and resurrection.

And it’s not just ‘our’ right here – but it’s the right of all who turn to Jesus in faith – in all of history and in all the years to come.

We are here at the start of a new year. I asked last week if you thought things would be better in the new year, or worse - for you, for your family, for our church, for our country, or for our world – and a lot of us, I think probably most of us, are expecting that things won’t be great in one or more of those areas.

Last week’s reading from the book of Revelation pointed to the hope that we have, but today’s reading assures us of the certainty of that hope. So let’s go into the new year in that certainty, the certainty that we are the children of God – not through what we’ve done or have to do, but because of what Jesus has done.

We don't need to enter the new year with lives filled with anger, resentment, fear, hatred or guilt. While we will experience those emotions from time to time, we are new people, born of God: God's children – God's people - filled with peace and hope more powerful than the emotions that scourge our lives and our world.

Friends, let us enter 2026 the assurance and the understanding that that God has called us to become his children... children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

Amen