

John 1:1-18 Sermon for 10.30am at Methodist Church Covenant service

Thank you very much for inviting us from St John's to join you today at your annual Covenant service. It is great to get together to pledge ourselves again to God's service. What better way to start a new year!

And what a better way to start the new year than with the prologue of John's Gospel. This was the first section of the bible I ever did a translation from the Biblical Greek for, so it's close to my heart (as sad as that might sound!) and it is also up there amongst the best examples of the Christian faith being summarised that we have. It leads us into the rest of the story of Jesus like an overture at the start of an opera or musical. It lays out the bones which the rest of the story will flesh out. And it sets the tone for the rest of the narrative.

And what a tone it sets! There's no dull, boring facts and figures, but instead it grabs our imagination and transports us onto another level to see, as if from a God's-eye-view, all that had happened in eternity past and the infinite significance of Jesus woven throughout all of history. It puts the story in its cosmic setting and gives us a taster of the excitement that is to come...

I don't want to take the magic and sparkle out of the reading by pulling it apart like an academic essay, but instead I'd like to just note three big elements of this prologue that really help set the scene for the rest of Jesus' life.

Firstly, I'd like to talk about light. In the first sections of the reading Jesus is the true light which shines in the darkness and enlightens the world and gives it life. Jesus as the true light of the world is picked up later in John as well when in chapter 8, he declares: 'I am and the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' Jesus is the light which gives life to the world. There is no light and no life without him. John is identifying Jesus as the Word which spoke the world into being and sustains all things. If you've ever heard anyone say that Jesus was just a good man, then this blows that completely out of the water. The Jesus we follow is the spark that burns in the darkness before time, he's the flame that burns within each of us, giving us life itself, and he's the light that holds back the tide of darkness that threatens to overwhelm our world.

There's loads that can be said about light. But as a new year passes into history and in a world with so much darkness, light is important. We are used to thinking about light and dark as opposites, and possibly as light and dark as opposing forces; like the ying and yang of balance, karma or Star Wars' light side and dark side, but really, when we think about it, light is a destroyer of darkness. Darkness only exists where there is an absence of light. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. Light destroys any darkness it touches. Darkness and shadow cannot swallow, absorb or nullify even a candle shining bravely in a dark building. Darkness is no match for light.

With Jesus as light and life, there is a true light lighting up the whole world. This light cannot be hidden and cannot be extinguished. It is a beacon of hope on a hill. It is a searchlight finding that missing person in the sea. It is the sunrise which dispels the nightmares. It is the torchlight that stops us groping around in the dark and gives us a bright shining path to follow. Our lives are filled with truth and light, simply because of Jesus, who is the Word of God who was with God in the

beginning and is who is God come to Earth to live with us. We no longer fear the night. We no longer fear the dark times because there is always a light which can never be extinguished for us to look to; there is always a life-light guiding us to port, even at our end.

At the beginning of a new year, and as we re-commission ourselves to follow this light, we are not discouraged or worried that our world ignores Jesus, but instead, we carry within us the light of life, and we pray that it would ignite our world, our country, and our village here in Menston with a light which dispels and burns away darkness. Our God isn't engaged in some battle with culture, with atheism or with terrorists; our God is the light which intends to shine in exactly these places, and we are the bearers of this message – there is a lamp on a hill, there is a light in the dark times, and there is a beacon for all to look to. No shadow will fall over God's light. No sun will set on his glory.

And this light, Jesus, if we receive him and believe in him will give us power to be Children of God. This ever-burning candle, not even flickering under the weight of darkness, gives us the chance to be God's own sons and daughters. I wonder if you've ever really thought about what this means. We're too used to just using it as a title, a designation – I'm a vicar and a child of God. I'm a doctor and a child of God. I'm retired and a child of God. Just another title we use to describe our lives, and generally the first one that gets dropped. Well, apparently this isn't just a title since it needs power to be given for it to be true. For all who believe in Jesus, the light of God's world, we are given power to become God's children.

We could talk about how this child-status gives us legal adoption rights to inherit from God our eternal life and salvation; we could talk about the love that we have for our children and therefore the parallels with God's love for us; we could discuss how being a child involves growth, discipline and responsibility. But really, for today, I just want us to wonder at the amazing fact of it.

God, who created the world, who breathed life into every single one of us, who loves all his creatures - this God has, created us into his children, despite our rejection of him, despite our only half-hearted acceptance of him, despite our ignorance of him. It's not just a title, it's a new birth, a new status, a new life as a child of God. It doesn't just change our behaviour and make us (hopefully) more ethical people, it doesn't just change what we do on a Sunday; instead it is a transformation, a re-creation, and a restart for all of us. A re-commission and a clean slate, beginning again as a child of the Most-High creator God who gave himself for us.

And this leads us on to talking about glory and grace. As God's children we have received Jesus and believed in Jesus' name. If we recognise Jesus as God's Son then we've glimpsed God's glory, and we are recipients of God's grace upon grace through Jesus who has made God known to us. Jesus is the glory of God. Just catch that for a second. It is through Jesus that we have had God made known to us. Any film you ever watch where they try to depict God's glory will have brightness, music, and transcendence. And all this is good. God is beyond anything we can imagine. We can't wrap our heads around his infinity, his power and his goodness, and everything we compare him to is simply a poor imitation. However, it's an amazing turn-around therefore that God has been made known to us most fully in a man, born at Christmas from whom we receive grace and truth. This man who spent 33 years sharing our dust, our dirt, our crumbs and our germs, is the one in whom God is best revealed to us. It is from him that we receive God's underserved goodness to us. It is because of him that we can be God's children, and it is because of him that there is a light in the darkness of this world.

At the end of the prologue, we are left with this amazing image of a God who wants to reveal himself to us – to pull up the curtain and show us what he’s like – but instead of astounding us and amazing us and blowing our mind with light and greatness, he instead demonstrates himself in his willingness to roll around in the dust, to be beaten down onto his knees, and to be lifted up and killed so we can see his glory – the glory of a God who gives everything because he loves us. The glory of a God who shines like a star; but undimmed, lets the darkness crash against him like the tidal wave of the sea; only to stand firm like a lighthouse in a storm, providing an eternal safe lodging for those who are his children. This is the God revealed to us in Jesus. A God who dispels darkness, who rebirths a family; a family who he can shower undeserved goodness on even when that costs him his very self.

In a new year, and as we recommission ourselves to God’s service, this prologue reminds us that we are not our own. We are here only by the light and life of Jesus. We are God’s family by his power, not ours. And we are undeserving recipients of God’s pleasure, and favour and revelation of himself. We are not our own. We are God’s. What matters is God’s will, not ours. And so, as his children, we commission ourselves to serve him; not under compulsion or guilt, but because we owe our very selves to him and it is God who has saved us from being swallowed in darkness.

We celebrate this Covenant because we are the lucky ones who are able to bask in Jesus, the light of the world; to bathe in the light of God’s glory; to be dazzled by our developing understanding of his own revelation of himself. We share in this light, and we aim that others will see this light through us. And therefore we give ourselves to God’s commission; to partnering with God in bringing his light to the world. It is our privilege and our joy. We are God’s children and like a supernova, we burst with his light.

Amen.