

Sermon 4-9-22 (SC)

Before the Beginning: What is a Word to God Anyway?

John 1:1-14

Today we are starting a new sermon series, which simply means that this term, we are going to be looking at something new. And the hope I have for this sermon series, its goal, is to deflect that spreading sense of despair which is threatening to take hold of our country. And you will know what I mean here. This is the sense of despair which looms every time we tune in to our news screens, when we hear of ecological catastrophe in Pakistan, or East Africa, when we see the terrible acts of violence unfolding in Ukraine, or indeed, when we consider the injustice of fuel poverty. And this term, we are going to think about how we might form a Christian response to these issues. We will consider how we might nurture hope, instead of despair. Hope, and not naïve optimism, or blind ignorance. And to do this we are going to look back to the pages of the Bible to tell a story, to follow the theme of New Creation, a theme which directs us towards a particular vision of the future, a well-ordered, hopeful future. The story of New Creation sees in Jesus, a past, and present, and a future that is praiseworthy.

And to tell the story of New Creation, we begin at the beginning. Or rather, before the beginning. It's like a film or book that starts with a narrator's voice setting the scene, that lifts you out of the present moment, and tells you all you need to know to follow the plot and progress of the main characters. And this story of stories, is set in context by the voice of John's gospel, chapter 1.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Now, it may well be the case that you are familiar with this very poetic passage of Scripture. It is so evocative and rich. And it's the set reading in the Church's calendar for Christmas Day. Now the issue is, at Christmas, the Vicar has to be on his best behaviour, and has to be attentive to the fact many people, guests and regulars alike have gathered on Christmas day to hear about the birth of Jesus Christ, have Communion and get back to Christmas Dinner as soon as possible. And there's absolutely nothing wrong that. But, it means it doesn't quite feel like the occasion to really assess in depth and detail what John means by the Word here.

But since it isn't Christmas, and we aren't distracted by the thought of turkeys in the oven, of family descending en masse in half an hour, let's ask a few awkward questions. And this is an opportunity to be a bit playful. And when I say "playful", that is of course vicar code for, "embark on a tour de force of what St Augustine had to say on the matter!" But admittedly that doesn't sound half as interesting or fun!

Have you ever stopped to consider why John's gospel begins the way it does – talking about *the Word*? Why not say, for example, *In the beginning was Jesus?* or *In the beginning was the Son, and the Son was with God, and the Son was God?* That makes a clear point, doesn't it?

What is it about words, or the idea of words, that John wants to use in his gospel to describe Jesus in all eternity – in his timeless glory?

Well let's begin by way of analogy and by thinking about the way we use words. Let's begin by thinking about speech. An idea comes to my mind, and my mouth forms a corresponding sound, words which you recognise and understand. But immediately after I have spoken a word, the sound passes away. My words are once again overtaken by silence. Even the chattiest amongst us must stop sometime. So, I speak a word, I say something, but then the sound passes away into silence. Now, is that the kind of Word we are dealing with in John's gospel? This Word is something spoken by God which then immediately passes into obscurity and silence? – well, clearly not. So, this Word, must be something which is being continually spoken by the Father – a Word forever in the process of being spoken, in the process of Divine articulation. A Word, eternally expressed by Father. A Word which resounds for all time. Now, there's a thought!

But, to use my well-loved onion analogy, that's only the first layer onion.

You might say to me. "but words are only signs". They are just the names we give to our ideas. So we may only speak a word for a moment, but the ideas that we are getting at well outlast the sound of the words themselves. And you're right. So if I say "bacon sandwich" for example, the thought of a bacon sandwich stays longer in the mind than the actual sound of the word. Yes, but even ideas eventually fade, ideas aren't forever. Is that the kind of Word we are dealing with? Does John want us to think of Jesus as an interesting idea which sticks in the mind a little while before fading away? Well, again, clearly not. So, this Word must also be continually in the mind of God. A Word that is continuously spoken by God, and continually considered by God. A word which resounds for all time, and a Word which resides in the mind of God for all time. Another thought.

But there's a further dimension to it too. Another layer to the onion.

Why is it, particularly when we are excited or angry, we will know exactly what we want to say in our heads, but we just can't find the right words to accurately express all we feel? How often do we open our mouths to say something, and out falls a tangled mess? Our words can be effective or ineffective. We can do a good job, or a bad job, of expressing ourselves. Now, for 90% of the time, we do an OK job. People seem to know what we are talking about, or at least they nod along politely. But

there are definitely times, no matter how articulate we might be, that we just cannot find the right words. Again – is this the sort of thing John wants to say of Jesus? That like our words, this Word might fail to express what God is trying to say? Of course not. The Word of God resounds for all time, it resides for all time, and perfectly reflects the mind of God for all time. The Word of God resounds for all time, it resides for all time, and perfectly reflects the mind of God for all time.

I know that this is heavy going, but bear with me. Here is what John is trying to tell us, that Jesus is closer to the Father than our words are to our own thoughts. Jesus better reflects God's nature than our words reflect our own thoughts. Because for God, thought and speech are the same thing: Jesus. Jesus is God's Word.

And Jesus is how God addresses the world.

Jesus is how God addresses the world.

Now, let's return to our story, the story of New Creation. How does John's gospel frame that story; how does he set it in context?

By establishing a firm principle that will be the foundation to all our responses to the many heart-breaking things we are seeing in the world at present.

Jesus is God speaking to the world. Jesus is God speaking to us. And if there is hope to be found in the face of ecological disaster, if there is hope to be found in the face of violent dictators, if there is hope to be found in the midst of economic crisis, it will be found in Jesus, who is God's eternally-spoken Word to us.

And in the course of this term, as we hear the story of New Creation, we will hear how God spoke his Word and all things came into being. How God spoke his Word, and that same Word became Flesh. How God spoke his Word and pledged to restore all things.

So, I pray, may the Word of God dwell in us richly, as we apply ourselves to learn his story of the Word eternally spoken of the Father. The Word eternally residing in the Father. The Word perfectly reflecting the Father.

In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.