

Some of you may have noticed that today's Gospel was the same one we heard on Christmas day. If you were at the Christmas vigil Mass or midnight Mass, you'd have heard about Mary, Joseph and the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, but if you came to Mass on Christmas day, you would have heard the same Gospel reading we've just heard a moment ago. So why have we got it again today and so soon? Well, it's because it is so important that the Church wants to be sure that no one misses it at Christmas time.

Another thing you may have noticed over Christmas are all the different ideas of what Christmas is 'all about'. The so called 'meaning of Christmas'. Songs, telly programmes, life gurus, celebrities, politicians, friends and family all seem to know the answer. Christmas, we are told, is all about the family, or joy, or inner peace, or goodwill, or children, or giving and generosity, or sparing a thought for those worse off than ourselves or contemplating the humility of the baby Jesus and so on. Commendable as all of these may be, Christmas is not really all about any of them.

The Gospel reading we have just heard doesn't mention any of these. Neither does it mention Bethlehem or Mary and Joseph, or a manger, or shepherds and angels and yet we heard it on Christmas day, and just in case we missed it, we have heard it again today. Why? Because what we have just heard is what Christmas is all about.

It's also quite amazing. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made". What's that all about, then? Well, that's the most amazing bit, because what John is saying here is that God – whom he calls 'the Word', who as a man we came to know as Jesus, existed before and beyond time and space, and that *he created* both time and space and everything in it.

This may not sound like big news in our day and age, but remember that St John was writing before Copernicus or Galileo, or Isaac Newton, or Albert Einstein. He didn't know that time and space existed, at least not as we understand them now. Most people of his day believed in gods that existed somewhere in the physical world, be they the sun, or a mountain, or in mythical gods living in the sky or in the stars or in the sea, but John's God not only comes from beyond all of these things, he created them, and

that's what makes this passage amazing. This didn't come from any human thinking, because human thinking hadn't got there yet. This can only have come from God.

St John starts his Christmas narrative with the words 'In the beginning'. Again, this is no accident or throw away line. These are the same words found at the very beginning of Holy Scripture, the first words we find in the book of Genesis. 'In the beginning' Genesis tells us, 'God created the heavens and the earth'. Again, what St John is telling us, is that Jesus is the infinite God whose existence predates not just Bethlehem, the manger, the shepherds and the angels, but creation itself, because he himself is the Creator. The other Gospels hint at the divinity of Jesus through the narrative of the virgin birth, but St John is giving us a full-on broadside and making clear that Jesus the man is also God himself. God becoming one of us is what Christmas is all about.

To make things abundantly clear, St John then goes on to mention John the Baptist as someone who was not the light, but a witness to the light. We may be forgiven for asking: what has John the Baptist, great as he is, got to do with Christmas? For the early Christians, as for us, John the Baptist was known as the last and greatest of all the prophets. When the Evangelist mentions John the Baptist, he is referring not just to him, but to all God's messengers sent throughout the ages; the prophets who came before Jesus and the saints who came after him. All were sent by God with a message for the rest of us, but like John the Baptist, all of them were human just like us. What he is stressing here, is that there are many great messengers but only Jesus is the light, only Jesus is God himself.

Then comes the sad bit: 'He came to his own' the Evangelist tells us, but his own didn't want him. This is often touted as a comment on the historical rejection of Jesus by the Jews, but it's much deeper than that. God came into the world as a human being out of love for all humanity, to save humanity from all our wrongdoing, but most of humanity doesn't give a stuff.

But the sadness is followed by a wonderful promise, because he goes on to say that those who do acknowledge Jesus as God become the everlasting children of God. Hold that thought for a moment if you can.

For St John the Evangelist it is less important where or in what circumstances Jesus was born, but that it happened at all. The astonishing thing about Christmas, is that God chose to become fully human while remaining fully divine for our benefit. Why? So that we could become like him. What for? Well, let's bring back that thought I asked you to hold. If you recall, the Evangelist told us that if we acknowledge Jesus as God, we become his children, not of flesh and blood which dies, but of God who does not die.

What St John is telling us, is that by recognizing the man Jesus as God, we inherit a share of his eternal existence beyond time and space. And that is what Christmas is all about. What we celebrate at Christmas time is that God loves us so much he was born as one of us, so that we could live happily forever with him. From this, springs our joy, our inner peace, our thoughts for our children and families, for the poor and our contemplation of the baby Jesus and all the other things people tell us Christmas is all about. As Harry Belafonte once sang 'and man will live for evermore because of Christmas Day'.