John 1

In the beginning was the word…. The word became flesh

John has this distinctive way of starting his Gospel. When people first heard it, I wonder what it said to them? My hunch is that he knew that different things would come home to different people.

Some people would immediately notice the “in the beginning,” and it would remind them of the way the Scriptures themselves begin. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”; and the way God did it was by speaking. “God said ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” God created by means of his word, by speaking. His words were like a magician’s words: he speaks, and poof, something happens. Or his words are like a commander giving his soldiers orders. He speaks and they act. “In the beginning was the word.”

And “the word became flesh.” So Jesus grew up to be someone whose words were also creative. He tells someone who is sick, “Pick up your bed and walk,” and the person does. He says, “Your sins are forgiven,” and they are. In Jesus, God’s word is embodied. It becomes something you can see at work in the world.

Other people would spot another link with the Scriptures. When John goes on to speak of the word being with God and things coming into being through the word, he’s picking up not Genesis but Proverbs. That’s the way Proverbs talks about God’s wisdom being involved in creation. Look at the insight, the skill, the cleverness that was involved in creation, Proverbs says. God’s wisdom was involved in bringing the world into being.

So it was God’s wisdom that became flesh. Jesus was the embodiment of wisdom. People knew that when they heard him. They were amazed at the things he said. He understood about life and about God about living, and when you heard him, you realized he knew what he was talking about. But then he turned what we would think of as wisdom upside down, because he ended up being crucified, which doesn’t look like a wise thing to do, but the New Testament calls it a strange kind of wisdom. It turned out to be the wisest thing imaginable, to let people kill him—and then let God raise him to new life.

There might be yet other people listening to John talk about the word, and it would make them think of something else. In their world, as in our world, people would ask the question whether there is any meaning to the world as whole. Is it just a collection of bits? Is there any rationale to it, or any purpose to it, or any logic to it? Does anything hold it together? And some people would say there was, and some people would say there wasn’t. If you were Jewish and therefore you knew the God the Scriptures speak of, you’d say, yes, of course there’s some meaning to it, some logic, some purpose to it. And the way you might talk about that is to talk about there being a kind of “word” in it or behind it.

So what John says is that the word was in the beginning. That is, before God created the world, God had a purpose in mind for it, a rationale for it. It was going to have logic and meaning. There was a point to it. And then he adds that the word became flesh. The meaning of the world is embodied in Jesus. Look at Jesus, and you will understand what holds the world together.

One more bell that the idea of Jesus being God’s word might ring with John’s readers. The New Testament often talks about people preaching the word of God. Now we talk about the Bible as the word of God, and I used to picture the apostles going around with the Bible in their hand and preaching from it, but actually that’s not what the New Testament means when it talks about preaching the word of God. In that context, the word of God is the gospel message, the message about Jesus.

So when John says that the word was there at the beginning with God, another point it would make to people is that the gospel wasn’t something new when Jesus came. The gospel goes back to the beginning, and before the beginning. The gospel is about who God has always been. The Christmas message is new, but it’s old, as old as God himself.

In the beginning was the word… and the word became flesh. In the beginning God spoke, and God spoke through Jesus. In the beginning God used his wisdom in creating the world, and Jesus embodies God’s wisdom, not least when he dies. There was a purpose and a meaning and a logic and a rationale about the world God created, and Jesus is the embodiment of that purpose and meaning. The word of God is the message of the gospel, and even that goes back to the beginning.