

“The Word Made Flesh” (December 2016)

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by Rev Paul Graham

Though it may have passed by your attention, one of the debates that has been going on for many years is over our English language. There are two camps, as is usual with these things. One camp is all for keeping the English language free from evolution, change and flux. The other camp sees the English language as an entity, growing up, maturing, changing and developing as the years go by.

There are those who say that Chaucer and Shakespeare were responsible for bringing a lot of new terms into our language and we're no different. Each year, the Oxford dictionary publishes its "word of the year", this year's offering being the frankly scary "post-truth" (*relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief*), which didn't even really register as a word before this year of referendum and election. Among previous winners of this award, reflecting the times that they appeared, there has been "selfie" (2013), "credit crunch" (2008) and "Sudoku" (2005). Some of these are so new that they are denoted by a red squiggly line in my version of Microsoft Word to show that even Bill Gates isn't sure what they mean!

My favourite etymological story is for the word "orange", for which I have to credit the TV programme "QI". Apparently the word was originally used only to describe the fruit that bears its name. It was only many years later that the word was also used to describe the colour; hence "robin red-breast", despite it having an orange chest. Not quite as ground-breaking as answering the question "which came first: the chicken or the egg?" but diverting nonetheless.

I have mixed feelings when words become verbalised; sometimes these can be (in my opinion) innocuous and convenient, such as "texting", others times less so. For example, I was concerned to hear throughout the summer about Olympic athletes' chances of "medalling", thinking that with all the drug controversy that dogged the Games that this was a dangerously ambiguous term to use in commentary; too many athletes have been found guilty of "meddling" in other ways to make this comfortable!

And we are guilty in church of creating our own language. Over the centuries, we have made, adopted and adapted terms for our own use; words such as "liturgy", "hymns" and "Gospel" all have roots outside the church or have been created specifically for their current meaning. And we're still at it. There is a term that has become quite fashionable in some church circles, but remains a mystery to many both inside and outside the church and one that I want to explore further with you now: "incarnational ministry."

What is "incarnational ministry" and why do we make up a word that seems familiar, yet isn't (certainly it's got Bill Gates confused)? We are probably aware of what we mean by "ministry" and we'll probably recognise the root "incarnation" in the first word. However, what does it mean and, more importantly, what does it mean to us now?

The Message defines "incarnational ministry" perfectly when it paraphrases John 1:14 *"The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood"*. Reflecting the fact that Jesus walked the earth, ate and drank with people, wept, spoke with, touched and lived among a wide range of humanity, we are called to follow him in being his hands and feet, his eyes and ears, his flesh and blood in our society today. That's what "incarnational ministry" means and it's not a new concept, though it's got a shiny new name.

Jesus, therefore, had an "incarnational ministry"; he was the embodiment of God on earth, in his time and in his locality.

This is what we celebrate at Christmas. We remember that Jesus' "incarnational ministry" started before he was born through the words of the prophets, through the promises of Gabriel's messages and laid in the manger in Bethlehem.

We wonder at the joy of the shepherds, the outsiders in society whom God invited to be the first visitors to see the new baby. We marvel at the gifts of the wise men, full of rich significance and symbolism. We are amazed that God uses the ordinary and makes it extraordinary; the incarnation of himself in Jesus to minister to his people.

We then realise that we can be part of that ongoing story of "incarnational ministry" through the Holy Spirit. God asks of us nothing more than to continue in that same vein. This is what God shows through those we encounter in the stable: to see that, just like our current word of the year "post-truth" is a conflation of two existing terms, "extraordinary" is the same. We are invited to live in the "ordinary" of life, with God adding the "extra".

And as we enjoy the full richness of Christmas it's important that we remember that Jesus continues to invite us to enter into his "incarnational ministry"; after all, the origins of the word "Christmas" mean literally "Christ sends".

Are we willing to join in?