

[You And Me, Me And You...](#)

November 29, 2020

By Rev Paul Graham

Read John 1:1-14



Today marks the first Sunday in Advent, the time of year that builds up to Christmas (in church at least, if not in the high street that has been doing its own build up since mid-August, even in these COVID-19 times). In a couple of days' time, we will open the first door and eat the first chocolate[\[1\]](#) or melt the first 24th of the candle[\[2\]](#) as we smoothly segue from November to December. Our traditional "pinch and punch" to herald the start of the last month of the year will be ameliorated by the anticipation of something nice behind that first door.

So, we too are starting our Advent adventure, as for the next four weeks we start to turn our gaze on a stable/cave in a backwater town of first century Palestine. To aid us in our thinking as we consider the very different way that we will mark Christmas this year, we will be considering the very different ways that the four gospel writers understood who Jesus was. The hope is that we will also be challenged in our understanding of who Jesus is, particularly for us today in 2020, where hope has generally been in as short supply as toilet rolls back in April...

John's Gospel should really have a health warning as an editor's introduction: "Warning, what you read here can dangerously stretch your brain". The unwary will approach John's writings full of vim and vigour, before crawling out at the far end gasping for air and wondering what they've just gone through. Not for

the faint-hearted, our Gospel-writer and he starts as he means to go on with our reading today.

“In the beginning was the Word,” John writes. OK, so what constitutes the beginning? The beginning of the book, or the beginning of the world, or even of time itself? Certainly, anyone with a passing knowledge of the Old Testament will recognise the phrase as identical as the first words in Genesis 1:1. Maybe John is wanting to point us right back to the beginning of the Bible as well as time itself; or at least the bit that his Hebrew audience would have recognised – as John’s Gospel forms part of the New Testament, it’s too brain-stretching even for John to be able to reference the full canon of Scripture that won’t be decided on for another 400 years after he wrote down these words. But it isn’t too taxing to see that John is wanting to set his stall out at the outset that what comes next is rooted in what has been recorded before. However, I can already feel my brain creaking and I haven’t even reached the end of the first sentence...

Maybe we ought to lay down some ground-rules before we go any further.

For a start, we usually assume that the John who wrote the Gospel is one of Jesus’s disciples, probably the one who he refers to modestly as “the disciple Jesus loved” (e.g. John 13:23). This isn’t necessarily the case. Our author may be another John who was also a witness to these events, or a chronicler recording them using someone else’s first-hand account (possibly John the disciple) or a member of John’s own congregation/cliقة, a “John-a-like” if you want. So, the first rule is that things are not what they seem on the surface; there are depths even within the depths of John.

The second rule is that the English language is limited when it comes to explaining complex ideas; more so in many ways than the Greek that the gospel was recorded in. So, for example, the term “love” we see used many times in John’s Gospel (and many others) may have one of four (or even five) possible renderings[\[3\]](#) when translated from Greek to English.

So, with these two rules in mind, we get to the second part of the first phrase in the first sentence: “The Word”. In Greek, this is read as *logos*, and our translation into English really doesn’t do it justice. It is worth bearing in mind that our use of “The Word” in this reading means more than we think if we not only consider that it was originally written in a different language, but also that this particular language takes us deeper into what John was trying to convey.

Just for a moment, try to forget who you are and where you are reading this. Imagine, instead, that you are an ancient Greek scholar reading these words in your native language.[\[4\]](#) For your average Greek scholar, the term *logos* will have different connotations than to your average 21st Century person (academic background accepting). If you were a follower of the Stoics (and let’s face, who wouldn’t be?), you would fully understand *logos* to be the definition of the active relationship between the created world and whatever passes for you as the divine. In other words, the *logos* can be found anywhere and any when as the relationship between anything.

But John uses the term very differently, as The Word (*logos*) isn’t to be found in some sort of God-in-everything way (pantheism, if you prefer the official term), but as God himself in relationship with himself (John 1:1-2). But then it gets more complicated (if that’s possible), because John goes on to say that The Word was found in a certain place and at a certain time as a certain person we know as Jesus (John 1:14).

With that in mind (and you can stop pretending to be an ancient Greek scholar now), consider also how your average First Century Hebrew will have read this. We know that the phrase “In the beginning” echoes the opening of the first book of the Torah[\[5\]](#) but also the “Word of God” is commonly used in the Old Testament (Psalm 33 is a good place to start) to describe the activity of God in his world. We might want to suggest that the Spirit of God is to be seen in a similar way, and that may well be true, such is the mystery of the Trinity...

So, what do we understand from all this?

That is not only a great question that continues to cause theologians to scratch their heads, shrug their shoulders, and suggest trying one of the more narrative Gospels (which we will do next week), but also leads us to consider this identity of Jesus in the context of today.

The *logos*, the very essence of the relational God, in existence from the beginning, present through the recorded history of the Old Testament, arrives in human form as a tiny, helpless baby in Bethlehem. This is the scope of God's compassionate love for humanity: that he would choose to walk among us, live as part of a family, be active in a community that was hurting, broken and divided, be isolated and abandoned, and suffer grief and pain just as we do.

Jesus, as the *logos*, the active Word of God, is in relationship with those around him, not just as part of the Trinity. This is at the heart of the word *logos*; that Jesus is about connections with others, just as much as we are. The human race was designed to work in relationship with others; "no man is an island" (thanks, John Donne) might usefully sum this up.

However, what we see in our world today is a fracturing of those relationships; bitter feuds between people who disagree over race, borders, pandemics, *Bake Off*, anything. As much as the human race can be characterised as being created for relationship, we in turn have created almost infinite ways of destroying those relationships.

The *logos*, Jesus, brings us hope that these relationships can be restored, starting with our own relationship with God. Moving briefly from Christmas to Easter, we see how Jesus' own sacrifice of his relationship with the Father on the cross offers us a chance to restore our relationship with God through grace and forgiveness. And it is with grace and forgiveness that we will be able to live in better relationships with our neighbours.

If you thought that the mind-bending journey through the inner workings of John's mind and the concepts that we've found here are difficult, I can only apologise. But then there is also a wonderful simplicity to it all. Jesus, the *logos*, was born to show how active God is in his world, at restoring relationships, bringing healing and wholeness to the broken and embracing the outcast. It's just a shame that we still aren't doing that ourselves - yet...

Amen.

[1] Or beer drunk, perfume sampled or pork scratching eaten, depending on your choice of Advent Calendar...

[2] In our house, we usually diligently light the advent candle for about the first week, then do it in four- to five-day batches as and when we remember, usually finishing it off in early January. A chocolate Advent Calendar is never so neglected...

[3] C.S. Lewis' book "The Four Loves" is possibly quite helpful in this instance, but there are plenty of other examples of the slipperiness of Greek to English translation...

[4] You are welcome to wrap yourself up in a bedsheet to get the full toga effect if you want.

[5] The Torah, that describes everything from creation to the return journey from slavery in Egypt, with Technicolor Dreamcoats on the way.

(Photo by [Clarissa Watson](#) on [Unsplash](#))
