

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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I find the Christmas story compelling and enthralling in so many ways. The thought of God loving us so much that He personally intervenes in human history, is glorious and heart-warming. Contemplating the infinite God of eternity and creation as a helpless baby is staggering. Contrasting the brutality and wicked self-preservation of Herod, with the faith and worship of the wise men (Matthew 2:1-11) and the shepherds (Luke 2:8-20) is both shocking and instructive. Rising above all these though, for me, is the wonder of the incarnation itself. That God, who is spirit and infinite, became a man, with a body confined to one place at a time. A body that felt tiredness after a long day's journey (John 4:6), and was so weary after a preaching tour, that Jesus fell asleep in a small boat (Mark 4:38). I simply love the statement of John from 1 John 1:1, *"That which ... we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, ... and our hands have handled ..."*. I can hear a sense of wonder in John's words, as if he can still hardly believe just Who it was that he, and the other disciples, had followed, through those wonderful years before the Lord's death.

I want to use our five senses this morning to help us think through just what the coming of the Almighty God, in the person of the Lord Jesus, really meant for us, and for God Himself.

Seeing

"No one has seen God at any time", John 1:18. That pretty well sums up the human experience of God before Jesus came. I often think about Moses' request to God in Exodus 33:18, *"Show me Your glory."* *Moses had one of the closest relationships with God of any of the Old Testament believers, but God replies, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, ... But, you cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live"* (Exodus 33:19-20). It was almost part of the definition of God, for a godly Jew, that you could not see Him.

The whole tabernacle and temple systems were based on God being behind a thick curtain, where only one man could approach, on one day each year, and even that was with fear and trepidation (Exodus 30:10, Hebrews 9:7). God might sometimes appear as an angel, or in apparently human form, but the very rareness of these events seemed to emphasise God's inaccessibility. Then one day an angel announces to a few shepherds in an obscure part of Israel, *"Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: you will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."*

The response of the shepherds is, *"Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child"* (Luke 2:10-17). These humble shepherds were some of the very first human beings to **see** God!

Years later, when Jesus was commencing His preaching and teaching ministry, two disciples of John the Baptist inquired of Him, *"Rabbi ... where are you staying?" and He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where He was staying, and remained with Him that day"* John 1:37-39. Can you imagine Moses inquiring where God was staying and receiving the answer, *"Come and see"*, or being able to remain with God in His dwelling place for the day?! What an incredible thing it is that the invisible God was seen in Jesus Christ.

One of my favourite accounts in the gospels is that in John 9:1-41 of the man born blind. Here is a man who has seen nothing at all for his whole life, and this is transformed when he meets Jesus and takes Him at His word. As he tells the story himself, *"A Man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed, and I received sight"*, John 9:11. As the story unfolds, his appreciation of what Jesus has done, and who He is, grows, and his boldness in telling others about Him keeps increasing. But this boldness antagonises the powerful Pharisees, and he is cast out of the synagogue. When Jesus heard about this he found the man and asked him, *"Do you believe in the Son of God?" He answered and said, 'Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?' And Jesus said to him, 'You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you.' Then he said, 'Lord, I believe!' And he worshipped Him"* (John 9:35-38). How beautiful that the Lord can say to the man born blind, *"You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you."* Seeing was still brand new to this man, and he was seeing and hearing the Son of God!

Hearing

My favourite of all the Christmas carols is 'Silent Night'. Something about the simple words and tune, touches my heart every time I hear it. But, in many ways, the night was anything but silent! God had been more or less silent for 400 years. He had sent prophet after prophet to warn a disobedient nation, and call them to repentance, but after Malachi there is no recorded prophet from God for another 400 years. Maybe many of the people in Israel thought God had abandoned them forever: heaven knew they probably deserved it. But then angels spoke to Zechariah (Luke 1:5-25) and Mary (Luke 1:26-38), announcing the imminent arrival of the forerunner of the Messiah, and the Messiah Himself. Then more angels appeared with announcements for the shepherds of the arrival of God's own Son in this world (Luke 2:8-20). The nation went from hearing nothing from God, to a positive chorus of angelic proclamations. But, most amazingly of all, God's own voice began to be heard within the world, and it was the voice of a little baby! At the start, we have recorded the things that people said **about** Jesus: the words of the angels, Simeon and Anna. Then Luke 2:40 says, "*And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.*" How startling that God incarnate should be in a position where He needed to grow! But His voice needed to be heard in a coherent way.

Luke 2:49 gives us the first recorded words of Jesus, and the only record of His words before adulthood. "*Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?*" This response to his parents, when they had to return to find Him in Jerusalem, is a helpful summary of all that He did in His public ministry. "*My Father's business*", beautifully describes everything that Jesus said and did.

The explanation of the men sent to arrest Jesus when they returned, empty handed, to their masters, gives us some understanding of the impact of Christ's words, "*No man ever spoke like this Man*" (John 7:46).

Touching

For me, touch is the one sense that is most central to the incarnation. The Old Testament contains visions where God, or at least some aspects of Him, are made visible. God's voice is occasionally heard, even if it often strikes fear into those who hear it. The sacrifices of animals and incense evoke smell and taste connected with the presence of God. All these are true, but reaching out and touching God was inconceivable. When Uzza reached out a hand to steady the ark, the symbol of God's presence, he was instantly struck dead (2 Samuel 6:6-7). When the Levites had to carry the ark they used long poles to help them keep safely remote (Exodus 25:14-16). When the people followed the ark with Joshua across the Jordan they maintained a carefully prescribed distance (Joshua 3:4). The whole system was like an old fashioned museum with "Do Not Touch" signs hanging everywhere! It was not so much that you might damage the exhibits, more that touching would be fatal to you! It's hard to overstate the contrast when Jesus is born. He is held by His mother and laid in a manger (Luke 2:7). When Simeon picks the Child up in his arms it is no surprise he is struck with wonder and thankfulness (Luke 2:25-35). The old man has just held his own Creator and Saviour!

The theme of touch carries on throughout Christ's public ministry. Listen to this section from Mark 10:13-16: "*Then they brought little children to [Jesus], that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. But when Jesus saw it He was greatly displeased and said to them, 'Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God.' ... And He took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them.*" And it wasn't just children. In Matthew 8, the Lord touches a leper who needs healing (Matthew 8:1-4), and Peter's mother in law, who has a fever (Matthew 8:14). Elsewhere He touches eyes, tongue and ear and other people, including a woman with a bad reputation, touch Him, and it is recorded that "*As many as touched Him were made well*" (Mark 6:56).

It is remarkable, that in the creation, God works purely through words, speaking everything into being. But in the incarnation God touches, and is touched, with a freeness that is both startling and beautiful. I can't think of anything else that so clearly underlines how close Christ came to sinful human beings, than this sense of touch. He was solid and substantial; really there. Not only that, He was close and accessible; even to those, like the lepers, whom nobody else would dream of touching. John 1:14 speaks about how, "*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us*". It is no surprise that it is also John who writes, "*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life.*" 1 John 1:1.

'Heard', 'seen', 'looked upon', 'handled': can you hear the amazement in John's voice as he contemplates the privilege he and the disciples had enjoyed?

It is not as if God had provided some sort of model, or representation of Himself, so that He could accommodate our physicality and need for touch, sight etc. It was "*The Word Who became flesh*" (John 1:14). The One in Whom "*All the fullness of the Godhead bodily*" (Colossians 2:9) dwelt, was, at the same time, fully God and fully man. In fact, it

would be more accurate to say that He **is**, both fully God and fully man, since the incarnation has not been in anyway compromised, or reduced, by His death, resurrection and ascension. In resurrection Jesus said to the disciples, *“Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have”* (Luke 24:39). The risen Christ may have a different order of body, which can pass into locked rooms, but it is still a human body; and when we are at home with Him in heaven, with our own new bodies, He will still be a real Man, subject to touch, and will remain so eternally.

Tasting

When David wrote in Psalm 34:8, *“Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good”*, he was, of course, using metaphor. He was encouraging his readers to experience personally the Lord’s goodness, and make it their own possession. I doubt David ever foresaw a day when God would participate in the same five senses that we do.

There isn’t an obvious reference to taste in the nativity story itself, but it did strike me that as an infant the Lord Jesus was laid to sleep in a manger (Luke 2:7), a feeding trough for animals! The gospel accounts are characteristically restrained with their descriptive language. There are many events in the Lord’s life where we would love to have a fully detailed account of what occurred, and are given just a handful of words.

We have remarkably little description of the Lord’s birth, but the words that we have do speak volumes about the circumstances. *“So it was, that while [Joseph and Mary] were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn”* (Luke 2:6-7). *“No room”*, how vivid a description of how God was received in His own world, and how accurate a description of so many people’s lives, even today! *“Laid Him in a manger.”* When you consider who ‘He’ is in this sentence, the One who says in Psalm 50:10-12, *“For every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the mountains, and the wild beasts of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all its fullness”*, you get some idea of the step God has taken! The owner of everything, including all cattle, having an animal food trough for His first ever bed! The One who has need of nothing, being dependent on His mother for food and care! How comprehensive was His coming down: how thoroughly did He take part in our humanity?

There is one lovely reference to taste in what John calls the *“beginning of signs”* in John 2. After Jesus had commanded the waterpots to be filled with water (John 2:7), *“He said to them, ‘Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast.’ And they took it. When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it had come from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. And he said to him, ‘Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!’”* (John 2:8-10) So the man’s taste gave testimony to the miraculous power of the One who did everything well, and retained the powers of the Creator, even as man in this world.

However, the most frequent use of the word taste in the gospels, is when Jesus refers to those who will not *“taste of death until they see the kingdom of God”*, (Matthew 16:28, Mark 9:1, Luke 9:27) and this chimes well with Hebrews 2:9 which says, *“But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honour, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone.”*

Even at Christmas, Christians always remember that Christ came to earth as a man, in order to die as a Saviour. He was made *“lower than the angels”* for the express purpose of *“the suffering of death.”* No doubt, Christ tasted many things during His life on this earth, and probably many of them were bitter, but the bitterest must have been tasting death for everyone. What incredible grace of God it was to send His Son to taste the death that we deserved!

Matthew 27:34 tells us that when, on the cross, they gave the Lord *“sour wine mingled with gall to drink... when He had tasted it, He would not drink.”* He would not dull his senses with the drink intended to numb the pain and provide a little relief. But when Peter had drawn his sword in the garden of Gethsemane, to fight to avoid Jesus’ arrest, He had said, *“Put your sword into the sheath. Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?”* (John 18:11) All through His life, the Lord Jesus had been entirely obedient to His Father, and He would be fully obedient, even when it meant the suffering of the cross.

Smelling

“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.’ ... When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshipped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” (Matthew 2:1-2,

10-11) Luke's gospel tells us about the visit of the shepherds to see Jesus, very soon after he has been born (Luke 2:8-20). Matthew recounts the visit of the wise men, which appears to have taken place somewhat later. The wise men bring their famous gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Two of these gifts are valued for their smell. Frankincense was added to some of the sacrifices mentioned in the book of Leviticus, including a grain offering described in Leviticus 2:1-16. *"When anyone offers a grain offering to the Lord, his offering shall be of fine flour. And he shall pour oil on it, and put frankincense on it. He shall bring it to Aaron's sons, the priests, one of whom shall take from it his handful of fine flour and oil, with all the frankincense. And the priest shall burn it as a memorial on the altar, an aroma made by fire, a sweet aroma to the LORD..."* (Leviticus 2:1-2). Frankincense has a very sweet, perfumed smell, and it represents that which is acceptable and pleasing to God. It is a very lovely picture of the life that the Lord Jesus lived as a perfect man, serving God in this world. Everything that Jesus did, thought and said, from infancy to the end of His life, was perfectly pleasing to God. His life was completely perfect, like the fine flour of the offering, and it had that lovely aroma of frankincense that was always a *"sweet aroma to the Lord"*. It reminds me of the time of the Lord's baptism when God declares from heaven, *"You are My beloved Son, in You I am well pleased"* (Luke 3:22).

Myrrh was also a perfume. It is mentioned several times in the Old Testament (see Genesis 37:25, 43:11, Exodus 30:23, Esther 2:12, Psalm 45:8, Proverbs 7:17 Song of Solomon 1:13, 3:6, 4:6, 4:14, 5:1, 5:5, 5:13), but isn't connected with sacrifices like frankincense. In the New Testament (see Matthew 2:11, Mark 15:23, John 19:39) it is usually associated with death. We have already noticed it mixed with sour wine in the soporific drink Christ refused from the cross. When Nicodemus came to anoint the body of Jesus he brought *"a mixture of myrrh and aloes"* (John 19:39). How fitting that these two gifts of the wise men represent the value to God of Christ's life on earth, and a foreshadowing of His death. How suitable also, that the wise men, *"fell down and worshipped Him"* (Matthew 2:11).

As we contemplate the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ this Christmas, and think about how He was "Immanuel, God with us" (see Matthew 1:23), we should respond in worship to the One Who is fully man, fully God and also our Saviour.

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