

---

# Christmas Needs to Get More Materialistic

John 1.14

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 24 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

---

When I was at seminary I had a friend who lived next door called Andy. Most days around four o'clock he'd knock on my door, interrupt me from my studies, and say "Whassit all about then? You found out yet? Want a cup of tea?" One way or another, whether several times a day or in the face of the mundane or the tragic, most of us ask ourselves at some point, "Whassit all about then?"

What most of us are searching for is some kind of logic. We'd like to know why the earth is so tiny...and yet so huge. We wonder why a year is so short...and yet a day is so long. We want to know why there are so many languages...and so little honest communication. We want to know what love is, and how to have just the right amount of it. On our days of despair we miss this sense of an inner logic to things, some thread that ties it all together. We have a name for people who can adapt easily to the logic life has taught them. We say they are people with common sense. And we have a grander name for people who seem to have penetrated beyond the outer logic of things to some deeper, inner logic. We say they have wisdom.

When St John composed the gospel that bears his name he was bringing together two parallel ways of thinking. One was Greek philosophy. The Greeks spent a great deal of time reflecting and pondering this inner logic of things. It was the center of their quest for meaning and truth. By the time John wrote his gospel the most influential form of Greek philosophy taught that the logic of things, which was called the *logos*, was a kind of fate, and that the role of humankind was to bring its will into alignment with that fate. Wisdom meant seeing everything, even suffering, as stemming from that same logic.

The second way of thinking was the faith of Israel. The Jews believed not in mindless fate but in a personal God. They believed that God had chosen them to be a particular example to other nations of what it meant to be God's children. Living in the eastern Mediterranean like the Greeks they'd picked up words like logic and wisdom and these words appeared in their scriptures but it wasn't clear how these concepts related to the God who had called them to be a people.

What John does in the opening words of his gospel is bring the traditions of Israel and Greece together and say that God and logic were as one from the beginning. "In the beginning was the word." In the beginning was logic, the *logos*. There is no God that is known without rationality, meaning and truth, and there is no logic that can exist outside the logic of God. It was logic that shaped God's creation of all things. John then tells us about a person called John the Baptist. This man called John did what prophets had done throughout the time of the Hebrew Scriptures: he used logic to point to God – in other words, he pieced together the common sense and the wisdom of the world to point out that there was a logic that went beyond human logic: what we could call the logic of God, or perhaps the "word of God".

And then John the gospel writer delivers his awesome summary in the most significant words in all of history, theology, literature and philosophy. "The word became flesh." The logic of God became an actual person. That which the great philosophers had taken to be inscrutable fate became tangible flesh. The great and mighty Yahweh, the one whom the children of Israel were warned they could not even set eyes on, came among us as a human being. The message of God became a man. What mattered became matter. Meaning became material.

And tonight is the night when we celebrate that most breathtaking moment. Tonight is the night when we recognize that the logic of the universe is embodied in a tiny, fragile baby. The whole life of God is organized, the whole shape of the universe is structured, the whole logic of creation is ordered, for this moment: that God become fully present and in loving relationship with us in the person of Jesus Christ. So the Christian faith is not fundamentally a theory, or an ethic, or an institution: it's fundamentally about a person, the word made flesh, and about a relationship, between the logic of God and our haphazard logic, between God's faithful presence to us in Jesus and our wavering fitfulness in response. Christianity is the story of that person and that relationship.

But somehow the wonder of Christmas is just too awesome for most of us most of the time. We get the logic bit – the Greek bit – most of the time: we get the idea that there must be some kind of organizing principle, some inner logic that underwrites the universe. How else, after all, would we sustain the work of an institution like Duke University, whose engineering and science and humanities are all founded on the assumption that there is such a logic at the heart of things and that we can find it out through research and experimentation? We also, particularly in America, somehow get the God bit – the Hebrew bit – most of the time: we get the idea that there's some kind of personal being out there or up there, who we often presume has a particular interest in us and to whom we turn in times of sorrow or tragedy or fear, or simply when we're looking for a word that means big and important and something that really matters. And that's where we tend to leave it, with a rather distant personal being that underwrites the logic within all things. Culturally it's useful, because it gives meaning without causing much offense. And spiritually it's comforting, because it doesn't ask too much of our imaginations or contradict too many of our commitments.

But it's not Christianity. Around this time of year, if we get tired of the carols, sometimes we put on a song like "From a Distance". It was written by Julie Gold and has been covered by Bette Midler, Nanci Griffith, Cliff Richard and a host of karaoke artistes. You must know it. It gives a wonderful picture of what the world looks like from a distance. "From a distance, there is harmony, And it echoes through the land". It's got a lovely tune. And then it says, "God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us from a distance". Sounds beautiful. But is it Christianity? No no no no no no no. It misses the whole point of Christianity. God is not some distant idea so spiritual that he rises above the clumsy material of earthly life. God doesn't watch from a distance like some benevolent grandfather watching the children play at the bottom of the yard. God joins in! The logic of the universe becomes incarnate in an individual human being. The word became flesh!

This is Christianity: not some set of disembodied ideals and noble values, but the life shaped around the logic of God in a human form, at Christmas found in a tiny crying baby, on Good Friday found in a naked man hanging on a cross, on Easter Day found in the wonder of a man defeating death and opening the gates of glory. And this is what we find difficult about Christianity: not its sense of the spiritual, not its sense of inner logic and its appeal to a personal God, for who could be against such reassuring things; no, what we find difficult about Christianity is its *materialism*, its claim that God took human, material form and lived and died and rose again clothed in and surrounded by the sheer material stuff of ordinary life. A God who is watching us from a distance is a God we can keep at a distance. A God who takes human form is a God that comes up close and personal, a God so close to us we can never escape his grace.

And that's why it's so ironic that Christmas is a season where it has become part of the annual tradition for the self-styled 'real' Christians to criticize everyone else for being so materialistic. Presumably this is because beneath all the wrapping paper and the schmaltzy mall muzak and the inflatable snowmen and the play station 13 is some kind of "spiritual" truth that most people aren't getting. And what is that oh-so-spiritual truth? That truth is that the word was made flesh – in other words, God is the biggest materialist of all, so much so that in Jesus God became material because the heart of his inner logic was for us to be his friends.

Let's stop trying to be more spiritual than Jesus. The spiritual message of Christmas is that God became incarnate – literally God took on human flesh, God became material. And that means the way to celebrate Christmas is to become materialists too. Godly materialists. Godly materialists seek God in human form. Godly materialists are like shepherds roaming around Bethlehem looking for Jesus among single mothers and teenage parents and homeless people and those who live among farm animals. Godly materialists are those who remember Jesus' parents fled Bethlehem for Egypt and so they're on the lookout for Jesus taking fleshly form among immigrants and refugees and those in fear of their lives in a new country. Godly materialists are those who remember the wise men traveled across the desert to find Jesus in a manger when they thought he'd be in a palace, and so they're always aware that discovering the fleshly Jesus takes patience, persistence, and humility.

Christmas is about God going to extraordinary lengths to be present and in loving relationship with a people who needed him but weren't at all sure they much wanted him. The way to celebrate Christmas is to go to extraordinary lengths to be materially present and to offer loving relationship to people who need God but aren't at all sure they much want him, to people who need you but aren't at all sure they want you. This is Godly materialism: offering flesh to make friendships. Hugging those whom no one hugs, eating with those

with whom no one eats, listening to those to whom no one listens, touching those whom no one touches, remembering those whom no one remembers, loving those whom no one loves. This is what God did at Christmas: this is what we do at Christmas. This is how we celebrate our material God.

G.K. Chesterton famously said that the problem with Christianity is not that it has been tried and failed but that it has never been tried. That's because most of the time Christianity remains just an idea – an idea about an inner logic, an idea about a personal but distant God. But Christmas tells us that Christianity is not just a comforting idea – it's a fleshly reality. God took human form. The word became flesh. Christmas is about stuff, about the stuff of life, and about how God put himself at the very heart of the stuff of life, the material of existence. And we can celebrate that fact in every fleshly, material encounter we have, today and every day. Don't try to be more spiritual than Jesus. Don't decry people for being materialists – because God's a materialist. Be a Godly materialist. Make Christianity a fleshly business in the most earthy, ordinary and human connections of your life. It's astonishing that God wants to be part of this material, human, earthy existence. But he was, he is, and he always will be. That's the good news of Christmas.