

**Year C**  
**- Christmas Eve -**  
Thursday, 25 December 2003  
St Salvador's, Stenhouse

**John 1: 1-14**  
**"Incarnation - Word - Language"**

**In the beginning**

- In the beginning was the film, and the film was *Star Wars*.
- *Star Wars* is the first film I remember going to see, I may have seen something before that, but this is the one lodged in my memory.
- It was around May 1977. I was 5 years old and I went with my friend Graeme for his birthday treat.
- I remember sitting in the cinema in Galashiels, Graeme sat on my right and I kept pestering him

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throughout the film to see the time on his new digital watch: the numbers glowed red in the dark, which was a real innovation in those days..

- What struck me first though was how HUGE the film seemed. It allowed me to see life for the first time on a universal scale, and I felt so small in comparison.
- The film begins in space: we see a wide screen of deep space, twinkling stars, and over the course of the next 90 minutes we are transported from one end of the galaxy to the other encountering all sorts of people and species; an action-packed tour of the creation, if you like.
- The next thing that struck me was how incomplete the film seemed. It always puzzled me as to why it

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began with the words "Episode 4: A New Hope" splashed across the screen.

- It referred to something which had gone before.
- This was the continuation of a larger story, and similarly the end demanded that it be continued;
- the story was not complete in itself.

### **Comparison with John**

- It seems to me that John's Gospel is a bit like *Star Wars*.
- In Matthew and Luke we hear the story of the birth of a child, of a census, a journey to Bethlehem, of a star and angels, and shepherds and wise men.
- But in John the camera pulls back and we see the universal significance and where this story fits in.

- Matthew and Luke's accounts begin, quite neatly: there is a definite beginning: the story opens with a couple engaged, the visit from an angel, a decree from Caesar.
- But John begins by pointing us to something which has gone before—this is Episode 4: A New Hope—the story starts not here, but at the creation.

### **Genesis**

- ❖ "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."  
(cf. *The Message*, Peterson - intro to John's Gospel)
- ❖ "In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, God is presented as speaking the creation into existence. God speaks the word and it happens: heavens and

earth, ocean and stream, trees and grass, birds and fish, animals and humans. Everything, seen and unseen, called into being by God's spoken word.

- ❖ While here in John's Gospel, in deliberate parallel to the opening words of Genesis, John presents God as speaking *salvation* into existence.
- ❖ But this time God's word takes on *human* form and enters history in the person of Jesus.
- ❖ And throughout the Gospel Jesus speaks the word and it happens: forgiveness and judgement, healing and illumination, mercy and grace, joy and love, freedom and resurrection.
- ❖ Everything broken and fallen, sinful and diseased is called into salvation by God's spoken word.
- ❖ Somewhere along the line things went wrong—Genesis tells that story too—we rebelled

against God and turned away from Him, and we are in desperate need of fixing.

- ❖ The fixing is accomplished by speaking—God speaking salvation into being in the person of Jesus. So Jesus, in this respect, not only speaks the word of God; he himself is the Word of God.
- ❖ If we ponder on this, we begin to realise that our words are more important than we ever supposed.
- ❖ Saying "I believe" for example, marks the difference between life and death.
- ❖ Our words acquire dignity and gravity in conversation with Jesus. Jesus doesn't impose salvation as a solution—salvation isn't thrust upon us; rather, Jesus narrates salvation into being through leisurely conversation, intimate personal relationships, compassionate responses, passionate

prayer, and—putting it all together—a sacrificial death. And we don't casually walk away from words like that."

## Language

- Language is an amazingly powerful thing.
- How we communicate as human beings fascinates me—from word play, puns and word games we use, often unnoticed, through to the creative use of language by novelists, playwrights and comedians—who seem to create something from nothing, almost plucking words from the air and building new worlds and perspectives before our eyes.
- The philosopher Wittgenstein was particularly interested in how we use language and was

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intrigued by its power. He noticed how finding the right expression—the right combination of words—had the power to effect a change in us, to bring us satisfaction and relief in times of despair.

- There is a power in words to change us and to change those around us.
- It was through a study of amongst others, Wittgenstein, that Christian writer Eugene H. Peterson came to recognise three types of language, which he simply labelled Language I, Language II and Language III.

## Language I

- ❖ "Language I is the language of intimacy and relationship.

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- ❖ It is the first language we learn...The language that passes between parent and infant is incredibly rich in meaning even if it is less than impressive in content, limited vocabulary and butchered syntax: parental whispers transform infant screams into grunts of hope.

## Language II

- ❖ "Language II is the language of information.
- ❖ As we grow, we find this marvelous world of *things* surrounding us, and everything has a name:
  - ❖ rock, water, doll, bottle.
- ❖ Gradually, as we acquire language, we are find our way around this world of objects.
- ❖ Language II [it comes as no surprise] is the major language used in schools."

## Language III

- ❖ "Language III," he tells us, "is the language of *motivation*.
- ❖ We discover early on that words have the power to *make things happen*, to bring something out of nothing, [parallels with Genesis there, perhaps?] to move [people into] action.
  - ❖ A child screams and a parent brings food and clean nappies.
  - ❖ A parent's command stops the child's tantrum —that at least is the theory!
- ❖ No physical force is involved. Just a word:
  - ❖ stop, go, shut up, speak up, eat everything on your plate.
- ❖ We are moved by language and use it to move others.

## Recover Language I

- The nativity of Christ—God made human— Jesus being born and living amongst us brings us back to the need for the first basic language.
- The languages of naming and instructing are all well and good, but as Christians our first language is the most basic language of love, of relationship, of worship and prayer.
  - It is not language *about* God or the faith;
  - it is not language *in the service of* God and the faith;
  - it is language *to* and *with* God *in* faith.
- It is the language of Mary and Joseph cuddling their Christ-child to keep him warm in the draught of the cave or stable, and gurgling and cooing with him in love.

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- It is the language of the shepherds, discovering the child and expressing their amazement at the wonder of life.
- It is the language of the wise men, in search of the Messiah, discovering a young child and offering their love and their worship before they have even opened their bags to offer their expensive gifts or opening their minds to ponder the theological consequences of this birth.
- I was speaking with somebody recently who was telling me about being at the birth of a friend's child and how she was on a high for about four days afterwards.
- This is *our* response to God at Christmas—it is a rediscovery of our loving response to God.

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- It is a joining in with those around the manger, of our coos and ahhs to God, not in some sentimentalised way but as an honest, heart-felt response to God's love for us and the wonder and amazement of Him giving us His life.
- It is a joining in, being a part of the story of Christmas—of allowing our stories to join with the cosmic story of God's creation.
- It is simply our responding to God in adoration, in love and in worship.

❖ *The Word did not become a philosophy, a theory or a concept to be discussed, debated or pondered.*

❖ *But the Word became a person, to be followed, enjoyed and loved!*