

It was somewhere between 1665 and 1667, when he had been forced to return home from Cambridge university due to an outbreak of bubonic plague, that Isaac Newton watched an apple fall from a tree (sadly the idea that it fell on his head is almost certainly a piece of fiction) and from watching it he developed his law of universal gravitation. I don't suppose many of us sit around pondering the meaning of so many things that happen around us in the way Newton did, but sometimes we do – and often we ask ourselves the question, “why did that happen?” Reaching the right balance between understanding what is going on in life and knowing when to just accept it, is one of life's big challenges.

When coming together for the first act of worship in a new year, it often gives us an opportunity to look back at the year just gone, and look forward to the coming weeks, months, and the whole year. On this Sunday, the 3rd January 2021, both looking backwards and looking forwards are actually very difficult. Trying to understand what has happened in the last year, and what might happen in the next, seems almost beyond us.

It was just before this Sunday a year ago you see, on 31st December 2019 that a "mystery viral pneumonia" was reported to have appeared at a market in Wuhan. From that moment on, life in China – and soon afterwards in the rest of the world – became very different. Our lack of understanding of what was going on is well summed up by what happened to our own Prime Minister. On 3 March he said, “I was at a hospital the other night where actually there were a few coronavirus patients, and I shook hands with everybody.” On the 6th April he was in intensive care with Covid-19.

By April we all had a much better idea of what we were facing, even if we didn't understand why, or indeed how long it would last. Despite hope over the summer, we are now at the situation where Angela and the churchwardens feel it is too risky for us to worship together in church, and we are again finding new ways to worship. But there is also hope. The vaccines are being rolled out, and the low-key new year celebrations show that virtual lockdown will hopefully control the growth of the spread until people can be vaccinated, but no-one can claim that life is anywhere near returning to normal yet.

Understanding what is going on in the world that you live in is sometimes very difficult.

Towards the end of the 1st century of the common era, various people were writing down the story of a most remarkable man. Jesus of Nazareth was a man who travelled around the Middle East for a period of probably about 3 years, preaching and healing the sick in a way that no-one had ever seen before speaking of God in a way that no-one had spoken before. Something like 30 to 40 years after his death and resurrection, what turned into the 4 gospels were written. Three of those, attributed to people called Matthew, Mark and Luke, are commonly called the synoptic gospels, because they include many of the same stories, often in a similar sequence, and in similar or sometimes identical wording. The fourth gospel, attributed to someone called John, is largely distinct. And it is distinct from the very beginning – and it is that beginning which we heard in our gospel reading today.

And in the same way that what is going on in the world can be hard for us to understand today, the beginning of John's gospel must have been a bit tricky to understand for those who had this gospel read to them soon after it was written. Or perhaps not.

From the very beginning, this gospel is different. Two of the three synoptic gospels give us the natural details of the birth of Christ – we have all the characters there – Mary, Joseph, shepherds, wisemen, stables, you name it they are there. John gives us the supernatural story – and he does that by talking about, “the Word”. But do we, and the people when it was written, understand the meaning of “the Word”?

John's gospel was most likely written in Ephesus, an ancient Greek city, meaning that the vast majority of people hearing this writing would have been Greek. John therefore was aiming to explain the story of Jesus to the Greeks who had no knowledge of Jesus' Jewish heritage, as well as to the Jews. And to do this John used “the Word”.

To the Jew “a word” was far more than a mere sound; it was something which had an independent existence, and which actually did things. In the Old Testament we hear about people giving their descendants their blessing – that was a word that did something. But there was also something that happened that made “the Word” even more understandable to the Jews.

A hundred years or so before the birth of Christ the Hebrew language died out and was replaced by Aramaic. The scriptures read in the synagogues were all written in Hebrew, and were still read in Hebrew, but then a translated form of the scriptures called the Targums were then read, and these were in Aramaic. When the translators created the Targums it was in a time when people were fascinated by the supernatural side of God and these translators were desperate not to attribute human characteristics to God.

Now, the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament, regularly speak of God in a human way, and so the translators, unhappy with this, replaced the references to God in the scriptures, with “the Word of God”. So, for example, in Exodus 19, when Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, the Targums stated the people were brought to meet “the Word of God”. So the concept of “the Word” was understood by the Jews.

This is all very well, but as I said earlier, the vast majority of John's audience was Greek – and they understood nothing of the Jewish heritage. But the idea of “the Word” was already in existence in Greek heritage, albeit in a different way.

In 560 BCE there was an Ephesian philosopher called Heraclitus whose basic idea was that everything was in a state of flux, changing from day to day, from moment to moment. His famous illustration was that it was impossible to step twice into the same river. You step into a river; you step out; you step in again; but you do not step into the same river, for the water has flowed on and it is a different river.

To Heraclitus everything was like that, everything was in a constantly changing state of flux – but not in some chaotic way; these changes were not haphazard. Heraclitus’ answer was that it was controlled and ordered, following a continuous pattern all the time; and that which controlled the pattern was the *Logos*, the reason, the “Word of God”. And Heraclitus expanded this so that in all of life there was a purpose, a plan, and a design – and it was all controlled by Logos, the Word of God. The Greeks had an understanding of “the Word” as well.

So, in order for John to explain Christianity to his largely Greek audience, but also making sense to the Jews, he started his writings by talking about something that everyone would have an understanding of – “the Word”. And so we get this amazing first verse. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And in one sentence, in three different ways, John describes Jesus.

First Jesus was there from the very beginning. His readers would have recognised those opening words from the start of Genesis – In the beginning. Second, the Word, Jesus, was with God. Jesus didn’t come later – he was always there with God. Third, a bit trickier – the Word was God. There is much analysis of the Greek which John used to write his gospel, but the explanation of this phrase that works for me is that the Greek can just as easily be translated as saying that “the Word was identical to God” – not the same being but two identical beings. So the Word was always there, the Word was with God, and the Word was identical to, but separate from, God.

But then we come to the fascinating aspect of John’s use of the “the Word”. He has found something of equal meaning to both Jews and Gentiles; he has used it three times in his opening sentence; but then only uses it just once more in the entire work – but here are the 4 most important words in John’s whole gospel – in verse 14 of chapter 1 – “the Word became flesh”. Jesus was incarnated. Jesus was born as born as a human being. To John, the practical details of how it happened don’t matter; the other characters involved don’t matter, the whole basis of Christianity can be explained, can be understood, in these 4 words – and anything else is a distraction. “the Word became flesh” is John’s description of the Christmas story – and he did it this way so that his readers would understand the story. Now John has explained Jesus’ arrival on Earth, he can refer to him as Jesus. “The Word” has done it’s job.

And this is what this opening passage of John’s gospel is teaching us. There are things in life that we should, and need, to understand. There are things that are worth expending worry over. But there are other things that we simply cannot understand. I started by talking about what happened last year – but why that happened perhaps doesn’t matter. Yes, there may well be lessons that can be learnt, but rather than looking backwards at what people didn’t understand, we should be looking forward to find ways of understanding what matters; understanding “the Word who became flesh”.

We can do our best to put that understanding into practice by seeing how we can care for people who are ill, who are stuck inside and are almost certainly facing weeks if not a few more months of often unbearable loneliness, but the vaccines will bring an end to this horrible period of our history – and instead of people pointing the finger of blame, we need to learn from John and point people to the truth. An understandable truth. A truth more important than any other. The truth that John later in his gospel called, "King of Israel", the "Lamb of God", the "Light of the World", and the "Only Begotten Son of God". He called him the "Son of God", the "True Bread", the "True Light", the "True Vine", and the "Way". But most importantly the Word, Jesus, is the "Resurrection and Life".

I finish by repeating the words that one of my colleagues wrote in the early hours of New Year's day.

It's hard to say Happy New Year... I don't know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future.

Wishing you all a hopeful New Year!

Amen.