

A Christmas Sermon (John 1:1-18)

by Lucien Coleman

E. Stanley Jones, the legendary Methodist missionary, often called "the Billy Graham of India," was a personal friend of many leaders of the Indian Independence Movement, including Mahatma Gandhi and Prime Minister Nehru. And, on this side of the ocean, he was a confidant of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. On two occasions, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his reconciliation work in Asia, Africa and Japan.

On one occasion he chose as his text for a Christmas sermon, John 1:14: *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father."* He said, "If I were to put my finger on the most important verse in Scripture, I would unhesitatingly put my finger on this one: "And the Word became flesh."

He went on to say, "I was being interviewed on TV by a brilliant commentator, who came to the point by saying, 'You go throughout the world preaching. What do you have to preach that others do not have?' " It was a good question--and valid. Just what did I have? The answer was simple, and simply given. "I have Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh."

Other religions are about our search for God; the Gospel is God's search for us. Other religions are the Word become word; the gospel is the Word become flesh."

John 1:14 is a brief text, but it proclaims an enormous truth, the truth that God himself took up residence on this planet in the person of Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son.

C. S. Lewis, the former atheist who became a devoted spokesman for the Christian faith, called this truth "the greatest of miracles." "The Christian story," he says, "is precisely the story of one grand miracle, the Christian assertion being that [the God who] is beyond all space and time, who is

uncreated, and eternal, came into human nature, descended into His own universe, and rose again, bringing nature up with Him."

Lewis went on to say, "There may be many admirable things which Christianity shares with all other systems in the world. But, if you take away the Incarnation there would be nothing left that is specifically Christian." And that was exactly the point on which E. Stanley Jones based that Christmas message.

During his extensive missionary career, he had come into intimate contact with Hindus, Sikhs, Moslems, Buddhists and Taoists. And he became well-acquainted with all their beliefs.

He found that other religions claim inspired writings, visions, miracle workers & faith healers. "But," he said, "only the Christian faith proclaims the truth that God came to dwell among us."

Theologians refer to this remarkable event as the "incarnation."
(The word comes from the Latin *incarnatus*, "to be made flesh.")

In the first two verses of John's Gospel, the eternal Christ is referred to as "the Word," a translation of the Greek term, *Logos*, a *concept of central importance in the Bible*.

In the very first sentence of his Gospel, John says: "the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Psalm 33:6 echoes this truth, telling us that "the Word" was the agent of creation: "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth."

And this is the truth that John 1:3 proclaims, "all things were made through him (i.e., the Word), and without him was not anything made."

The Word is also the giver of life. Have you ever noticed that it was by his word that God breathed life into the dry bones of Ezekiel 37:4? "O dry bones," the prophet says, "hear the word of the Lord." And this truth is emphasized again in John 1:4, where John writes, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men."

Hebrews 1:3 speaks of another remarkable function of the Word. There, the writer declares that the Son of God "upholds the universe by his powerful word."

Paul made the same proclamation in his Colossian letter: "all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:16-17).

John begins his Gospel with a truth of enormous importance, a truth that is foundational to our Christian faith: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." That is to say, before anything was created--before the universe itself came into being--the Word already existed.

So, when John writes in v. 14, "And the word became flesh and dwelt among us," he is referring to much more than the babe in a manger, "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." He is referring to the self-revelation of God himself."

The "good tidings of great joy" in Luke 2:10 is that this Word, this Word who was in the beginning, through whom all things were created, and who holds the universe together-- this Word "became flesh and dwelt among us."

"But why? Why did this exalted Word come to dwell among us? Why was the incarnation necessary?"

Imagine that you are watching a bee crawl about on the petals of a flower, and suppose you wanted to reveal yourself to that bee--your thoughts, your feelings, your personality. How could you possibly go about it?

You would be facing more than a language problem. Because, even if the bee could comprehend the meaning of your words, he still wouldn't be able to understand you--your joys and griefs, your aspirations and fears, your future hopes and past recollections--these things would be beyond his comprehension, because you are an entirely different kind of creature, a different order of being.

But, there might be one possibility, one way to make yourself understood. You might communicate with that bee if you could become a bee.

However, you would face yet another problem. How would you then convince him that you were not merely a bee, that you were something more than a bee?

John is referring to such a problem in John 1:10, where he writes: "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not."

Some of you might remember the dramatic event that took place in Midland, Texas, back in 1987, when little Jessica McClure, just an 18 month old toddler, was finally rescued after being trapped in a deep, narrow well shaft for 58 hours.

Television viewers all over the world watched on CNN as Robert O'Donnell, a fire department paramedic, went down into that 22-foot hole at the risk of his own life and brought the little girl to the surface in his arms.

That is a symbol of the incarnation. In the person of Jesus Christ, God came down into the pit of human existence in order to bring us out of darkness into the light.

When E. Stanley Jones, delivered that Christmas sermon I referred to at the beginning, he closed his message by saying: "And the Word became flesh. That is, indeed, good tidings of great joy." Then he added, "But the world will never know it unless the Word becomes flesh in my life and yours, time and time again."

That can happen when we respond to the invitation in John 1:12: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become the children of God."

If you will give yourself to Him, he will give himself to you. That is God's answer to the question, "What shall I DO about Christmas?"