

Mission: Jesus Style

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 January 2014

Preacher: Neil MacMillan

[0 : 00] Let's go back to John's Gospel. And the passage was from John chapter 1, the first 18 verses.

That's where we read earlier on. So in the run-up to Christmas, I was reading stuff about the incarnation of Jesus Christ. That's what we celebrate at Christmas time, is God being born into our world as the infant Jesus.

And I read an article called Incarnate, and it was written by a woman called Jill Catterani. It was a Christian article reflecting on incarnation.

And to try and explain the incarnation, she took the idea of a very famous prison in Louisiana in the United States called Angola Penitentiary.

And one of the amazing facts of Angola is the Penitentiary is that 94% of the prisoners who are sent there die there.

[1 : 20] So if you go to Angola, you have got a 6% chance of making it out the other end. And that's because many of these men are given such lengthy sentences, whole life sentences that they're never ever going to be released.

So when they know they're going there, they know they're going to be staying there for the rest of their lives, and they're going to die there one day. And back in the 1990s, somebody set up a program at that prison for people who were terminally ill.

It was a hospice program for prisoners suffering from terminal illness. And the idea was that other prisoners were trained to come alongside those who were terminally ill and be with them as they died in order to give them some comfort and some dignity in their death.

And that was a recognition that when we're really troubled and alone in life, when we're really suffering and sad, then sometimes what we long for more than anything else is simply just for someone to be there.

We long for the presence of another. So the woman writes this, she says, For the men at Angola who stare death in the eyes, they realize the tender importance of presence.

[2 : 49] For the child whose mother left and whose father was never there, for the melancholic soul that laments the evils of a fallen world. The incarnation is the only story that touches every pain, every lost hope, every ounce of our guilt, every joy that ever matters.

Where other creeds fail, the incarnation, in essence, is about coming poor and weary, guilt and famished, and the very scene in history where God reached down and touched the world by stepping into it.

So really what the Lady Joe Caterani is writing there, as she's saying this, that for every troubled person in this world, the story of the incarnation is the story of God stepping in to our world and into our story, and God making himself present in our lives.

And sometimes where explanation fails, where words fail, where theology fails, is the presence of God that brings healing, that brings peace, and that changes darkness to light.

And if you're not a Christian here tonight, our hope for you, our kind of desire as a church for you, and my desire for you, is not that you become a religious person, our aim isn't to try and make you follow a set of rules or to make you a good or a better person.

[4 : 32] What we really want for you is that you come to know the real living presence of God in your life, bringing you change and bringing you comfort and bringing you hope and bringing you joy and happiness.

It actually lasts in every different kind of situation of life. And it's that presence that really most of us, deep somewhere inside, is hungering for and longing for.

So that's the kind of theme we're looking at tonight. And what I want to do is just to look at how God becomes present in our world, and to use that then as a kind of model to say to those of us who are Christians that God wants you to become present in the lives of other people in the same way.

So what God does in the Incarnation, we as Christians have to learn as well. If God comes into our world to be with us in sorrow and trouble and difficulty, then we need to be ready to go into the lives of others and share with them in their sorrows, troubles and difficulties, to be a godly Christ-like presence for them in those kind of situations.

So first thing I'm going to look at is the mission. I'm going to focus my thoughts on verse 14 where it says, The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth.

[6 : 16] So we talk in church circles and in Christian circles, we talk about the mission of God. And John sort of spells out that mission quite clearly for us here.

He says, there's a world in darkness. There's a world that has rejected God. And instead of turning away from that world, God comes in his Son Jesus Christ into that world, and he comes as a light to illuminate the darkness, to dispel the kind of cloud of darkness that seems to hang over life so often.

And as I said earlier, John calls Jesus Christ here, he calls him the word. And he makes an extraordinary claim about Jesus Christ.

He says this, in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. So John claims right, the first thing he claims in his gospel is Jesus is God.

Jesus has always been God, and Jesus has always existed as God. So before he comes into our world, the word was God and was with God.

[7 : 42] Jesus, the word. Now the language behind that, the Greek term for word is logos, from which we get our word logic.

So the God who has always existed and who becomes incarnate in the flesh, Jesus Christ, the God who has always existed, he's the logos.

He is reason, he is logic. I just want to point that out because often in kind of pop culture views of Christianity, faith and reason are put up as opposites.

You can have faith or you can have reason. And Christianity says nonsense, faith is based on reason. And the only way that we can have a world that is logical and reasonable is if it's created by a God of logic and reason.

And without that underpinning, we have no guarantee that the world that we perceive makes sense, has meaning or has logic.

[8 : 46] So the foundation of thought, belief, whatever your thoughts are, belief, lies in the reason and the logos and the God who created the world.

And we're told he's always existed. He's always been God, but he then becomes something else. So he's always been God, but he becomes what?

He becomes flesh. So something new happens to God. And that new thing is that he takes on human flesh.

He becomes a real human being taken on a real human nature through the virgin birth. Now what does that mean? It means this, that Jesus is a human body.

God takes on a human body. He is a human mind. He has human emotions. He cries, he laughs, he rejoices, he feels pain and so on. He has human affections.

[9 : 44] He has a human psychology. He's human, really human. It's not kind of looks like a human, but isn't really human. It's not superhuman. It's just human.

Flesh and blood, sweat and tears, joy and laughter and sorrow and pain. Your humanity, that's what Jesus had.

That's what he shared. And so he becomes fully human as well as fully God. He doesn't give up being God. He remains completely and utterly God, and yet God in our flesh.

That means that he shares our world, shares our life, shares our pain, shares our hurt, shares our miseries, shares our fears. There is no dark place that you can go to in life that Jesus hasn't already been there.

There's no grief you're going to experience that he can't understand. God's not far away peering in at our lives through a telescope from the distance, observing us like sort of lab rats.

[11:00] God's on the inside of our life, looking out with us. In the book of Hebrews, it talks about Jesus as a priest, a high priest. It says, we don't have a high priest who can't be touched with the feeling of our weaknesses or infirmities.

In all points, he was tempted and tested like we are, yet without sin. So that means God knows our weaknesses, he knows our sorrows, he knows our struggles, he knows what is like to be us. And from the right hand of the Father, where Jesus is today, he looks down and he turns around to his Father. When he sees you struggling, when he sees you crying, when he sees you hurting, when he sees you lonely and afraid, he looks down and you know what he says to his Father in heaven?

He says, I know exactly how she feels. I know what that's like. And then he asks the Father to come and stand and work in our lives and help us.

And he gives us his presence through the Holy Spirit. Because of all that he saw and felt and suffered in this world, Jesus has a sympathy etched into his being that can never be outreached.

[12:22] So that's God's mission to come to our world, to become one of us, in order to bring us back to himself, to bring us out of the darkness into the light.

In order to make God known to us. John writes about it in verse 12, to all who believe in him. In his name, he gives the right to become God's children again.

So instead of having a broken relationship with God, you become one of God's family, one of God's children. Children born not of natural descent, human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. Brings a new life to you, a new beginning, a new relationship with him. And that's why Jesus comes into the world. Now what that tells us about God is this, that God has a heart of mission.

That God has a heart that longs for lost people, that reaches out to lost people, that sees people who are hurting and lost and broken and sinful and messed up.

[13:30] And he doesn't cold shoulder them or turn his back on them, he longs for them, he reaches out to them, he goes after them, he goes on mission towards them.

And if that's God's mission, what I want to say is it's got to be your mission and my mission also, if you're a Christian. If God's got that kind of heart for people, then if you're one of God's people, you should have the same heart.

So you can't turn away from a broken person, lost person, hurting person. You can't give them the cold shoulder. I found out recently that I am a descendant of Robert the Bruce.

If you don't know who Robert the Bruce is, then he's one of the legends of Scottish history who fought the English and gave them a doing. And for that many Scots look up to him. It's all ancient history now of course.

But you see, Robert the Bruce is my ancestor. So suddenly his mission becomes my mission. And I've decided I'm going to vote for independence and freedom because I share the genes of Robert the Bruce.

[14:52] So if you've got a shared identity, a shared family, a shared root, then it's naturally to want to stand for the same things and be the same kind of person.

And if God, if you follow a God with a loving, missional heart, then you should share God's loving, missional heart.

And that's what should be the guiding principle of the church. Sometimes we talk about the mission of God shaping the mission of the church.

And if God's mission is to come and rescue lost people, then our mission is to rescue God lost people and bring them to know God experienced the presence of God, the hope and the love of God.

And what I want to say just on top of that is we are suffering massive mission failure. So God's given the church a mission, which is go and reach lost people, share their love, that my love with them, the way that I have shown my love in the gospel.

[16:01] And somewhere, somehow, the church in Scotland gave up on God's mission.

Scotland is now they reckon less than 2% of people in Scotland are evangelical Bible believing Christians. 70% of people in the UK never, ever want to go to church again. They have no intention. So somehow over the last few generations, the church has walked away from the purposes of God and the mission of God.

And we need to repent over that because all we have done is really silently thoughtlessly said Edinburgh, Scotland, neighbour, colleague, go to hell for all I care.

And if that's how we are, then of course we need to repent. If we don't really care for people and don't care for their eternal destiny, then we're really profoundly out of step with who God is.

[17 : 23] And when we look at the church in general, I'm not talking about this church in particular, but when we think about the church in general, it's true. The church has become very inward looking, very preoccupied with itself. And Christians have become like that.

Christians think that God is there to make them happy, to have their needs met. And we're not here just so that God can serve us and make us happy. Rather we are here as God's people to say God is great, God is love, God is good.

And to point to Jesus Christ and to say to those around us, we know and love a great God who is worthy of all worship and praise.

So that's God's mission which we need to share briefly. Just want to say how does God carry that out? And I want us to think about his location. Where does Jesus locate himself? And he says he made his dwelling among us.

So God doesn't sort of take on our human nature and then come into the world and live in a kind of protected, sanitized environment.

[18 : 42] Jesus actually gets involved in the lives of ordinary people. He gets his hands dirty, he lives at street level. He gets involved with messy, complicated, difficult, troubled people.

And he deals with all kinds of crises and problems and hurts and fears. He doesn't cut himself off. He doesn't say that, you know, I'm God. I deserve a special kind of life.

I deserve a problem free existence. I deserve to live at a safe distance from people who are full of chaos and darkness and whose lives are messy and broken and difficult.

He locates himself right there among them. He lives among us, shares our lives. Now, you live among the people of your neighborhood, you live amongst your colleagues and friends and so on. But sometimes we can live amongst people and try and keep a safe distance from them. But if you're going to be a missionary, you need to be willing to really get to know people.

[20 : 00] So if I sort of decided that I should go and be a missionary in Spain, what would I have to do? Well, I'd have to learn Spanish. I'd need to start to get to know Spanish people.

I'd need to sort of start talking to them and listening to them. What do they make of life? How do they understand life? What's their view of religion? You know, all those things, processes.

Invite them round for meals, be kind to them, be generous, tell them about Jesus. Well, the thing is, I am a missionary, but I'm not a missionary in Spain. I'm a missionary in Edinburgh.

And so I need to do the same kind of things a missionary would do anywhere, spend time with people who aren't Christians. Listen to what they have to say about their lives, understand how they think.

Invite them into my home, be kind to them, tell them about Jesus. And yet, it's not just me that's a missionary in Edinburgh.

[20 : 59] If you're a Christian, you're a missionary, and you live in Edinburgh, you're a missionary in Edinburgh. If you're a Christian from Penzance, then you're a missionary in Penzance. If you're a Christian from Ireland, you're a missionary in Ireland.

You see, wherever you live, you're being put there, not just to kind of see out your days. You've been put there as a missionary to live for the glory of God and to bring other people to worship Him. So the office you work in, the street that you live in, the school you go to, the university you attend, whatever it is you're up to, day by day you're there, not just to earn your crust or to see through your days, you're there as the missionary presence of God.

And that means you can't hold non-Christians at a distance. You know, don't sort of squirrel yourself off at coffee break or lunchtime with your quiet time notes and your daily bread and forget about your colleagues.

You have to be sharing life with them. So I know one church that said to all the people, listen, it's hard to share the gospel with friends at work, but why don't you spend two hours a week out of the office with colleagues and get to know them and become a friend with them.

[22 : 07] And you're another church that said you eat 21 meals a week. One of those meals every week have some non-Christians at your dinner table with you. And so it's simple things, but just begin to think, I'm a missionary.

I live amongst lost people. They desperately need to hear about Jesus Christ. They need to experience the presence of God. So why don't you begin to live like a missionary would?

And think as a missionary thinks. Because if there are less than 2% people who believe in Jesus in Scotland, we are what misologists call an unreached nation.

And so there's a, you've got to think, I'm a missionary. And one of the great things that, you know, most people, if they read the Bible, they like Jesus, don't they? You know, I mean, a lot of people hate Christianity and religion and church and all the kind of stuff that seems to go with it.

But very few people read the Gospels and think, oh, don't really like that Jesus guy. There's something so appealing about Jesus, so attractive, so compelling.

[23 : 18] What was it? And it's this, he's real, isn't he? He's not a fake, you know, he's a real human being. He's more real than we are. We're the ones who fake it.

You know, he cried with people, he wept with them. He sat down and said, listen, I'm thirsty, can you get me a drink of water? Can you help me? Can you lend me your young donkey so that I've got something to ride into Jerusalem?

Can you lend me a room in your house so that I can meet with my disciples there? He didn't pretend that he had his life perfectly in order and he didn't need help from anyone. He was quite willing to sort of ask for help, to be real, to be authentic.

And so many Christians feel they have to present as if they're perfect and have got life sorted. And Jesus was perfect and yet imperfection still needed help.

And if we're imperfect, how much more do we need help? And so be real with people, acknowledge your needs, ask them for help. And that allows people to build genuine relationship with you.

[24 : 25] How many non-Christians, if you're a Christian, how many non-Christians do you really know to, you know, in depth? How much time do you give them?

Are you sharing life with them? So that's how Jesus locates himself. So the mission is reach out to lost people, share their lives. To do that, there's the location, live among them, be among them, be with them, be present in their lives.

When someone is lonely, afraid, sick, dying, whatever it may be, wouldn't it be great if you're the person that God's put to be with them, to sit with them, to pray with them, to comfort them, or to just be quietly there for them, wouldn't that be amazing?

The last thing is just about motive, it's all about love. Why does Jesus do all this? Well, He does it out of love.

God is love, that's what the Bible says. Here it's put this way, we have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth. So what's grace? Grace is a love shown to people who don't deserve love.

[25 : 43] God came to this world, why? To show us a love we don't deserve. Now that's wonderful, that's great. Because honest assessment of my life tells me I don't really deserve to be loved.

I don't deserve to be loved by my wife or my friends. I don't deserve to be loved by any of you lot, and I certainly don't deserve to be loved by God, do I?

But good news, God comes to show us a love we don't deserve. So that's grace. What's the truth that the Bible tells us? God is love.

So you may have lots of questions about God, and you may feel angry with God about some things, and you may hear so much criticism of God in the media and so on.

But the fact that the Bible puts out is God is love. No matter what else you know about God, God says, I am love. Isn't that amazing?

[26 : 49] Not just that I do love, I am love. God is reaching out to you here this evening. God is love, and He has love for you personally.

Love you don't deserve, but love. God is love. God is love. You may sometimes look at your life and say, well, the facts of my life suggest God is not love, or that God doesn't love me because my life is kind of not very nice.

And what the Bible says is, well, don't just look at the facts of your life. Look at the facts of His life. Look at the facts of Jesus' life.

Look at the cross and the resurrection. Look at Jesus dying. Look at how He suffered. Look at the pain that He took in Himself. God is love.

The cross especially shows us that in a very incontrovertible way. Jesus lived in a city called Jerusalem, part of His life.

[28 : 05] He didn't always live there. He lived out in the rural areas, but he spent quite a lot of his adult life in Jerusalem. And we know that when he was in Jerusalem, he kind of looked over the city

from Castle Hill, say, except it was Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

And do you know what he did as he looked out? He just started crying. That's the kind of person Jesus was. He cried for his city.

Why was he crying for his city? Because he thought, man, these people, they are so lost. And he wept for them.

And that's the heart Jesus wants me to have and you to have. From your city, for Edinburgh, that you care enough to cry.

Salty, real tears for lost and broken and hurting people all around you.

[29 : 11] So that's the way we've to love. How can I love like that? You know, I am a bit of a hard-hearted brute. I lived in Fife for 16 years. You live in Fife for 16 years.

It's hard not to be hard-hearted and brutal. And that's because Fife is a great place and we're strong and fearless.

So, but you know, a lot of us are really hard-hearted and indifferent, naturally. You know, I am not naturally a kind of guy who feels a lot of sympathy for people.

And I'm not naturally somebody who feels empathy or pity. And I'm certainly not a kind of guy who just wants to cry all the time. And so, what's wrong with me?

How, you know, how does this work? And what we need, of course, is for God's love to really come into our lives first.

[30 : 13] Because that softens our hearts. When we begin to see how much God loves us and the cost of that love on the cross, God's Son mashed up, bashed up, broken, battered, his life been snuffed out in a cauldron of hatred.

When we see that, that starts to break hard hearts. It starts to soften you as a person.

And so, to learn to love, we have to first of all accept God's love.

And let God love us. And let God be present in our lives. And we're afraid of that a lot at the time. We're afraid of God. We're afraid of change. And yet, there's nothing to be afraid of. Because of God who wants to be in your life.

[31 : 27] You know, He is good. He knows you and He loves you. And so, we need to just stop resisting.

And start opening our hearts and asking God to be present in love, in our lives.

So that we can love others. So, I'm going to stop. I'm going to pray. We're going to sing. Then we're done. Lord, we want to pray now for ourselves. Because we certainly know we're not the kind of people that we're created to be.

We know that we don't have compassionate hearts a lot of the time. That's just not who we are. Self-centred, yes. Selfish, yes. Angry, yes.

Loving, compassionate, very often no. So Lord, may you break our hearts. Our proud, rebellious, stubborn hearts. May you break them through your love.

[32 : 31] And change us through your love. And teach us to love you and to love others. Amen.