

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

1:14

**14. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.**

[*And the Word was made flesh.*] This sentence means that the eternal Word of God, the second Person in the Trinity, became a man, like one of ourselves in all things, sin only excepted. This He accomplished, by being born of the Virgin Mary, after a miraculous manner, through the operation of the Holy Ghost. And the end for which He became flesh was that He might live and die for sinners.

The expression "the Word," shows clearly that "the Word" who "was with God and was God," must be a Person. It could not reasonably be said of any one but a person, that He became "flesh and dwelt among us." Whether St. John could have found any other name for the second Person of the Trinity equally proper, we need not trouble ourselves to inquire. It certainly would not have been accurately correct to say that "Jesus was made flesh," because the name Jesus was not given to our Lord till after His incarnation. Nor yet would it have been correct to say, "In the beginning was Christ," because the name Christ belongs to the times after the fall of man.

This is the last time that John uses this expression, "The Word," about Christ in his Gospel. From the time of His incarnation he generally speaks of Him as "Jesus," or "the Lord."

[*Was made.*] This expression might perhaps have been better translated "became." At any rate we must carefully remember that it does not signify "was created." The Athanasian Creed says truly, "The Son is of the Father alone, neither made nor created, but begotten."

[*Flesh.*] The use of this word, instead of "man," ought not to be overlooked. It is purposely used in order to show us that when our Lord became incarnate, He took upon Him nothing less than our whole nature, consisting of a true body and a reasonable soul. As Arrowsmith says, "That which was not taken could not be healed. If Christ had not taken the whole man, He could not have saved the soul." It also implies that our Lord took upon Him a body liable to those weaknesses, fatigues, and pains, which are inseparable from the idea of flesh. He did not become a man like Adam before the fall, with a nature free from all infirmity. He became a man like any one of Adam's children, with a nature liable to everything that fallen humanity is liable to, except sin. He was made "flesh," and "all flesh is grass." Finally, it teaches that our Lord did not assume the human nature of any one family, or class, or people, but that nature which is common to all Adam's children, whether Jews or Gentiles. He came to be a Saviour for "all flesh," and so was made "flesh."

The subject of this sentence is a deeply mysterious one, but one about which it is most important to have clear views. Next to the doctrine of the Trinity, there is no doctrine on which fallen man has built so many deadly heresies as the incarnation of Christ. There is unquestionably much about this union of two natures in one person which we cannot explain, and must be content to believe. There is much that we cannot understand, be it remembered, in the union of body and soul in our own persons. But there are some points in the subject of Christ's incarnation which we must hold fast and never let go.

(a) In the first place, let us carefully remember that when "the Word became flesh," He became so by the union of two perfect and distinct natures in one Person. The manner of this union we cannot explain, but the fact we must firmly believe. "Christ," says the Athanasian Creed, "is God and Man; God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the world, and man of the substance of His mother, born in the world; perfect God and perfect man. Who, although He be God and man, yet He is not two but one Christ; one not by conversion of the godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God." These words are very important. The Word was not made flesh by changing one nature into another, or by laying aside one nature and taking up another. In all our thoughts about Christ, let us take care that we do not divide His Person, and that we maintain steadily that He has two distinct and perfect natures. The old Latin line on the subject, quoted by Gomarus, is worth remembering. It represents "the Word made flesh," as saying, "I am what I was, that is God: I was not what I am, that is man: I am now called both, that is both God and man."

(b) Secondly, when "the Word became flesh," He did not cease for a moment to be God. No doubt He was pleased to veil His divinity and to hide His power, and more especially so at some seasons. He emptied Himself of external marks of glory and was called "the carpenter." But He never laid His divinity aside. God cannot cease to be God. It was as God-man that He lived, suffered, died, and rose again. It is written that God "has purchased the Church with His own blood." It was the blood of one who was not man only, but God.

(c) Thirdly, when "the Word became flesh," He was made a man in the truth of our nature, like unto us in all things, and from that hour has never ceased to be man. His humanity was not a humanity different from our own, and though now glorified is our humanity still. It was perfect man no less than perfect God who resisted temptation, fulfilled the law perfectly, endured the contradiction of sinners, spent nights in prayer, kept His will in subjection to the Father's will, suffered, died, and at length ascended up to heaven with flesh, bones, and all things appertaining to man's nature. It is written, that "in all things it behooved Him to be made like unto His brethren. Moreover, He did not lay aside His humanity when He left the world. He that ascended up on the mount of Olives and is sitting at the right hand of God to intercede for believers, is one who is still man as well as God. Our High Priest in heaven is not God only, but man. Christ's humanity as well as divinity are both in heaven. One in our

nature, our elder Brother has gone as our Forerunner to prepare a place for us.

(d) Lastly, when "the Word became flesh," He did not take on Him "peccable flesh." It is written that He was made in "the likeness of sinful flesh." (Rom. viii.3.) But we must not go beyond this. Christ was "made sin for us." (2 Cor. v.21.) But He "knew no sin," and was holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and without taint of corruption. Satan found nothing in Him. Christ's human nature was liable to weakness, but not to sin. The words of the fifteenth Article must never be forgotten: Christ was "void from sin, both in His flesh and in His Spirit."

For want of a clear understanding of this union of two natures in Christ's Person, the heresies which arose in the early Church were many and great. And yet Arrowsmith points out that no less than four of these heresies are at once confuted by a right interpretation of the sentence now before us.

"The Arians hold that Jesus Christ was not true God. This text calleth Him the Word, and maketh Him a Person in the Trinity.

"The Apollinarians acknowledge Christ to be God, yea, and man too; but they hold that He took only the body of a man, not the soul of a man, while His divinity supplied the room of a soul. We interpret the word 'flesh' for the whole human nature, both soul and body.

"The Nestorians grant Christ to be both God and man; but then they say the Godhead made one person, and the manhood another person. We interpret the words 'was made' as implying a union in which Christ assumed not the person of man, but the nature of man.

"The Eutychians held but one person in Christ; but then they confounded the natures. They say the Godhead and manhood made such a mixture as to produce a third thing. Here they also are confuted by the right understanding of the union between the Word and flesh."

He then goes on to show how the ancient Church met all these heretics with four adverbs, which briefly and conveniently defined the union of two natures in Christ's person. They said that the divine and human natures when "the Word was made flesh," were united *truly*, to oppose the Arians,--*perfectly*, to oppose the Appolinarians,--*undividedly*, to oppose the Nestorians,--and *unmixedly*, to oppose the Eutychians.

Those who wish to examine this subject further will do well to consult Pearson on the Creed, Dods on the Incarnation of the Eternal Word, and Hooker's Ecclesiastical Polity, B. v., chap. 51,52,53,54.

[*Dwelt among us.*] The Greek word rendered dwelt means literally "tabernacled," or "dwelt in a tent." The sentence does not mean that Christ dwelt in His human body as in a tabernacle, which He left when He ascended up to heaven. "Christ," says Arrowsmith, "continueth now, and shall forever, as true man as when He was born of the Virgin Mary. He so

took human nature as never to lay it down again." The sentence only means that Christ dwelt among men on earth for thirty-three years. He was on earth so long conversing among men, that there could be no doubt of the reality of His incarnation. He did not appear for a few minutes like a phantom or ghost. He did not come down for a brief visit of a few days, but was living among us in His human body for the duration of a whole generation of men. For thirty-three years He pitched His tent in Palestine, and was going to and fro among its inhabitants.

Arrowsmith remarks that three sorts of men are described in the Bible as living in tents: shepherds, sojourners, and soldiers. He thinks that the phrase here used has reference to the calling of all these three, and that it points to Christ's life on earth being that of a shepherd, a traveler, and a soldier. But it may be doubted whether this is not a somewhat fanciful idea, however pleasing and true. The Greek word rendered "dwelt" is only used in four other places in the New Testament (Rev. vii.15; xii.12; xiii.6; xxi.3), and in each of them is applied to a permanent, and not a temporary dwelling.

[*We beheld His glory.*] St. John here declares that although "the Word was made flesh," he and others beheld from time to time His glory, and saw manifest proof that He was not man only, but the "only-begotten Son of God."

There is a difference of opinion among commentators as to the right application of these words. Some think that they apply to Christ's ascension, which John witnessed, and to all His miraculous actions throughout His ministry, in all of which, as it is said of the miracle of Cana, He "manifested forth His glory," and His disciples saw it. Others think that they apply especially to our Lord's transfiguration, when He put on for a little season His glory, in the presence of John, James, and Peter. I am on the whole inclined to think that this is the true view, and the more so because of Peter's words in speaking of the transfiguration (2 Pet. i.16,18), and the words which immediately follow in the verse we are now considering.

[*The glory as of the only begotten of the Father.*] This sentence means "such glory as became and was suitable to one who is the only begotten Son of God the Father." These words will hardly apply to Christ's miracles. They seem to confine the glory which John says "we beheld," to the vision of glory which he and his two companions saw when Christ was transfigured, and they heard the Father saying, "This is my beloved Son."

Lightfoot's paraphrase of this expression is worth reading, though he does not apply the passage to the transfiguration. "We saw His glory as what was worthy, as became, the only begotten Son of God. He did not glisten in any worldly pomp or grandeur, according to what the Jewish nation fondly dreamed their Messiah would do. But He was dressed with the glory of holiness, grace, truth, and the power of miracles."

We must carefully remember that the adverb "as" in this place does not

imply comparison or similitude, as if John only meant that the Word's glory was *like* that of the only begotten Son of God. Chrysostom says, "The expression 'as' in this place does not belong to similarity or comparison, but to confirmation and unquestionable definition, as though he said, we beheld glory such as it was becoming and likely that He should possess, who is the only begotten and true Son of God and King of all." He also remarks that it is a common manner of speaking, when people are describing the appearance of a king in state, to say that "he was like a king," meaning only that he was a real king.

Glassius, in his *Philologia*, makes the same comment on the expression, and quotes as parallel cases of the use of the adverb "as," 2 Pet. i.3; 1 Pet. i.19; Philemon 9; Rom. ix.32; Matt. xiv.5; 2 Cor. iii.18. He thinks it a Hebraism, denoting not the similitude but the reality and truth of a thing, and quotes Psalm cxxii.3 and Hosea iv.4 as Old Testament instances.

[*The only begotten of the Father.*] This remarkable expression describes our Lord's eternal generation, or Sonship. He is that Person who alone has been begotten of the Father from all eternity, and from all eternity has been His beloved son.

The phrase is only used five times in the New Testament, and only in St. John's writings. That God always had a Son appears in the Old Testament. "What is his son's name," says Agur. (Prov. xxx.4.) So also the Father says to Messiah, "Thou art my Son: this day have I begotten thee." (Ps. ii.7.) But the Sonship now before us, we must carefully remember, is not to be dated from any "day." It is the everlasting Sonship of which John speaks.

The subject is one of those which we must be content to believe and reverence, but must not attempt to define too narrowly. We are taught distinctly in Scripture that in the unity of the Godhead there are three Persons of one substance, power and eternity--the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. We are taught, with equal distinctness, that "Sonship" describes the everlasting relation which exists between the First and Second Persons in the Trinity, and that Christ is the only begotten and eternal Son of God. We are taught, with equal distinctness, that the Father loveth the Son, and loved Him before the foundation of the world. (John xvii.24.) But here we must be content to pause. Our feeble faculties could not comprehend more if more were told us.

Let us however remember carefully, when we think of Christ as the only begotten Son of the Father, that we must not attach the least idea of inferiority to the idea of His Sonship. As the Athanasian creed says, "The Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one, the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son." And yet the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father. The argument of the ancient Arians, that if Christ is the Son of God, He must necessarily be inferior in dignity to God and subsequent in existence to God, is one that will not stand for a moment. The reply is simple. We are not talking of the relationship of mortal beings, but of the

relationship between the Persons of the Trinity, who are eternal. All analogies and illustrations drawn from human parents and children are necessarily defective. As Augustine said, so must we say, "Show me and explain to me an eternal Father, and I will show you and explain to you an eternal Son." We must believe and not try to explain. Christ's generation, as God, is eternal--who shall declare it? He was begotten from everlasting of the Father. He was always the beloved son. And yet, "He is equal to the Father as touching His godhead, though inferior to Him as touching His manhood."

[*Full of grace and truth.*] These words do not belong to the Father, though they follow His name so closely. They belong to "the Word." The meaning of them is differently explained.

Some think that they describe our Lord Jesus Christ's character, during the time that He was upon the earth, in general terms. Full of grace were His lips, and full of grace was His life. He was full of the grace of God, the Spirit dwelling in Him without measure; full of kindness, love, and favour to man; full of truth in His deeds and words, for in His lips were no guile; full of truth in His preaching concerning God the Father's love to sinners and the way of salvation, for He was ever unfolding in rich abundance all truths that man can need to know for his soul's good.

Some think that the words describe especially the spiritual riches that Christ brought into the world, when He became incarnate and set up His kingdom. He came full of the gospel of grace, in contradistinction to the burdensome requirements of the ceremonial law. He came full of truth, of real, true, solid comfort, in contradistinction to the types, and figures, and shadows of the law of Moses. In short, the full grace of God and the full truth about the way of acceptance were never clearly seen until the Word became flesh, dwelt among us on earth, opened the treasure-house, and revealed grace and truth in His own person.

I decidedly prefer the second of these two views. The first is truth, but not the truth of the passage. The second appears to me to harmonize with the 17th verse, which follows almost immediately, where the law and the Gospel are contrasted, and we are told that "grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."