

JOHN 1:14
AN EXPOSITION FOR
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF
CHRISTMAS 2003

"We Have Seen His Glory"

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Grace, Mercy and Peace from
Almighty God, the Father, the Son,
and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The reading we will look at more closely this morning is the Gospel reading for the Second Sunday of Christmas, in which we are told:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the God's one unique Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

When you first think about it, it seems rather odd that when it is said of the Son of God that He "became flesh" the Bible says "*we have seen his glory.*" I say odd because "becoming flesh" is really a staggering demotion for God's Son. Such astronomical cosmic condescension is involved, in fact, that you would think when the Bible speaks of God's Son becoming flesh, it would say "the Word became flesh and we have seen his humility" (or even "we have seen His humiliation").

That would be perfectly true, if it said that. Yet, instead, we are told,

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the God's one unique Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

By human standards we would not say that Christ's initial arrival was particularly glorious. Other aspects of Christ's work, yes, but not the bit about becoming flesh.

Glorious by any standards is St. John's description of how God's Word created the world and without Him nothing was made that was made. Glorious by any standards are those awesome statements about how God's Son (the Word) existed before the foundation of the world – that God's Son is divine – that *the word was God*. But the Evangelist does not speak of glory yet, despite saying all of that about Christ being God's word and equal to God.

No, St. John speaks of glory that *we have seen only when he speaks of the incarnation of God's Son.*

We know what is glorious about immortal equality with God. We can see a glory in the pre-existence of God's Son from all eternity. We can see glory in God Son's power to make everything in the world that was made.

But we have to ask ourselves the question where is the glory in the incarnation? Where is the glory in being conceived human and being a poor baby

being laid in a manger? Where is the glory in God's Son looking like an ordinary human being?

None of those things are glorious by human standards. Yet all of those things are glorious by angelic standards. For in the incarnation of God's Son, and in his humble birth, the angels see the glory of God's love. Hence the angels' song of "*Gloria in Excelsis*" at the birth of Jesus.

So glorious was the birth of Jesus that even the humble state of the audience that night – mere shepherds on a hillside – did not detract from the glory about which they sang. Knowing that they were seeing the redemption of the whole visible creation by means of that humble birth, the angels sang, "Glory be to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men."

They sang that, not just because God ordered them to. They did not sing just because they had a message to deliver and it happened to be a singing telegram. No, they sang for joy as they did when they saw the creation of this world in the first place (Job 38.7). They sang for joy because they knew they were seeing the glory of God's love as they had never seen it before. By angelic standards, nothing could be more glorious.

Every year as Christians think about the Christmas story, much is said about the lack of glory by human standards of Jesus humble birth. But if we only speak of how all the details of the Christmas story lack glory by human standards, then we are not adequately explaining why the angels speak of

glory in connection with the birth of Christ. Nor do we fully understand St. John in his gospel when he says that *we have seen his glory* when we have seen the word made flesh.

It is not that angels and St. John didn't know about real glory by human standards. Angels have forgotten more about glory than most human beings have ever learned. By all accounts, Satan had glory by human standards before his fall into banishment. Likewise, St. John beheld scenes of glory in visions and revelations before he wrote his gospel. St. John and the angels knew what glory was, all right, by human standards. But what the Evangelist speaks of, in this context, is glory by angelic standards.

And what is that? *Glory by angelic standards is the glory of God's love.* The glory of God's love and forgiveness – as displayed by the coming into human flesh of God's Son – is something that excelled all glory these angels had ever seen.

By angelic standards, nothing is more glorious than human salvation. This is why the Bible says that "*there is rejoicing in heaven among the angels of God over every sinner who repents*" (Luke 15.10). By angelic standards, human salvation is tremendously exciting, for human salvation is the supreme showcase of God's love.

God's treatment of the angels that sinned did not showcase His love. No, all that showed them was God's justice and wrath against evil. As far as God's invisible creation is concerned, His sav-

ing mission of sending His Son to be our Savior is the supreme demonstration of God's love. This is why the Bible says that *"even angels long to look into these things"* (1 Peter 1.12). Angels find the supreme demonstration of God's love tremendously exciting.

So an angel enthusiastically proclaims to the Virgin Mary that God has a plan to save God's people from their sins through her Son called Jesus. So angels joyfully announce the birth of Christ, telling a group of shepherds that there is *glory* where there is peace between God and men reconciled through Christ. *"Goodwill towards men"* – graciously bestowed through Christ – *that* is where there is glory by angelic standards.

Is there glory in the Christmas story by human standards? Not really. That is why St. John observes that although the world was made by Christ and all human beings are his own, when He came to them they did not recognize Him nor were they impressed by Him. Even today people do not see the true glory of Jesus Christ.

A new book has come out called *"The Quest for the American Jesus."* It suggests that Jesus is still very popular in this country. As far as Americans are concerned, Jesus is a glorious character, but that does not mean that people see his true glory.

Americans may appreciate His wise teachings, His attractive personality, or see in Jesus merely some kind of im-

pressive hero figure. But if people do not see Him from the point of view of the angels, they are not seeing His true glory.

The angels see Jesus as the Lamb that was slain – as God's sacrifice of love, sent to make atonement for sinners by laying down His life to pay the price of human sin in order to rescue humanity from its doom (Rev. 5.12). Unless people see the glory that the angels see, they are not seeing the true glory of Jesus Christ. If the American Jesus is only glorious by human standards but not angelic standards, that is not the true Jesus.

The true Jesus is glorious by angelic standards but not glorious by human standards.

⁹*"The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*

¹⁰*He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.*

¹¹*He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.*

¹²*But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,*

¹³*who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

¹⁴*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

God grant us an angelic perspective
as we look at Jesus Christ – to worship
Him as they do and even more so. As
Isaac Watts invites us, “Come, let us join
our cheerful songs with angels round
the throne. Ten thousand thousand are
their tongues, but all their joys are one.
‘Worthy the Lamb that died’ they cry,
‘to be exalted thus’. ‘Worthy the Lamb’,
our lips reply, ‘for He was slain for us’.
Amen.