

This is a sermon for children. It won't be particularly short, it's not going to involve balloons - probably - but it's aimed at an intelligent 11-year old. Many of you will have heard much of it before, and I apologise for that. If you've come here hoping to avoid a sermon aimed at children, may I suggest straight away that you open a Book of Common Prayer and commit some lines of the Athanasian Creed to memory. But I'm going to pitch the next few minutes at the level of a tolerably bright child - and indeed we're lucky that we do have some here this morning.

Many years ago, more years than I care to remember, when I was an undergraduate, I used to spend most of my time in the Bodleian Library. Every day I'd come in to the lower reading room, and every day I'd pass the desks where sat Henry Chadwick, John Kelly and young Betsy Livingstone. Every day you saw the pile of human knowledge being added to as you saw the books and papers growing higher and higher in front of them. Every so often I'd take a book down from a shelf in the room they were working in, and I'd marvel at the unfamiliarity of the Syriac alphabet, or the complexity of the arguments of Philo or Evagrius Ponticus.

One day I went to my philosophy tutor, who unusually in those days was a supporter of the College Chapel and something of a theologian himself; I went to my philosophy tutor and I asked him: Christ said you have to be able to accept the faith like a little child; so why do we need people of the calibre of Henry Chadwick and Betsy Livingstone to grapple with these things for us? Can't we find a way of making things simple? His answer was courteous but short: "you come to a philosopher to make things simple?"

He had a point. Christ was the focus of all these profundities and complexities. Christ walked and talked in Palestine, and in a way *he* had it easy because he could explain everything just by opening his mouth or

moving a hand. In Luke's Gospel John the Baptist sends messengers to ask Jesus 'Are you the one who is to come, or is there another?' and Jesus sends the answer back 'Tell John what you've seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised.' You didn't need to worry about the relation of the three persons of the Trinity when you saw these things going on around you.

That's how Christ made things simple. Another way of making difficult truths accessible is by writing songs about them. Once in Royal David's City was written as part of the catechism, not as a Christmas hymn at all. 'For that child so dear and gentle is our Lord in heaven above'; that's Mrs Alexander's first take on the Incarnation; and it's a good starting point. 'And he leads his children on to the place where he is gone'; it's as good a beginner's guide for the Incarnation as 'he died that we might go to heaven, saved by his precious blood' is of the Atonement.

But it doesn't always work. The gospel passage we've heard today is part of the prologue to St John's Gospel, it's softening us up for the full text that we'll hear on the morning of Christmas Day, and it's not quite such an easy thing to simplify it in a carol. 'He is that he was, and for ever shall be, but becomes that he was not, for you and for me'. That's really amazing, I wish I could have written that; and if you find it simple we'll arrange a Lambeth DD for you right away.

It can't all be made simple, my tutor was right; but we can always look for images that will help us to find some sense in it. That's what Christ did with his parables, after all; that's what St John did in the Book of Revelation when he painted the great word pictures of the end of time. And it's what we have to do if we want to talk with each other about the hope we've been given.

All this has been introduction - I did say this wouldn't be short - so let me just quickly recall where we're going. I said this is a chance to think about the Prologue to St John's Gospel before we hear it for real at Christmas: and I'm hoping to present some images or pictures that could be useful to a bright 11 year old. So here goes.

First, we know that God existed before time. He existed, he exists, in eternity, which is his house as time is his allotment. But this is not something scientific. If physicists in Oxford or CERN eventually manage to find a way to look back beyond the big bang we won't surprise God standing there in his laboratory designing apples and talking snakes. We have to look at time in a way that might have made sense to the writer of Genesis if we are to make sense of what the writer of Genesis says. The Hebrew view of time was different from ours. For us the future is out there in front of us, just waiting for us to go forward into it. The past is behind us, done with, we're walking forward, away from it. For them it was the other way round. For them what's in front is the past: there it is spread out in front of us in all its detail. There's Adam and Eve, there's the crib at Bethlehem, there are all the lives that people have lived. And the future, well, that's behind us, out of sight, we can't see it because it's not made yet. All this is like a great dome around us, the horizon stretching away in all directions, and everything there's ever been or will be is arranged around us. It's not like a film strip, one frame after another, it's a great panorama and all the human race from the beginning of time to the end have it in their view. So if the light of God breaks in on it, or the Word of God is spoken, it spreads throughout the whole dome, not just one little corner of it. That's why Christ can say God is the God of Abraham as well as of the people around him: once eternity has been introduced into time it's there for ever and throughout all.

Secondly, and I apologise if you heard me talk about this last month, here's a second image, showing how time and eternity could intersect. Imagine a colony of ants living on the ground, going to and fro about their normal business. All they know is the ground they live in, the life of the air is something entirely beyond their ken. Then one day, out of the blue, from another universe as far as they know, a flying ant drops in on them and tells them about life in the air. Can they conceive it? Vaguely, perhaps. Can they share in it? Well, there are three possibilities: the flying ant could just disappear whence he came, leaving just the memory of some other hinted at possible but inaccessible life; or he could stay there and hold on, prolonging the knowledge of this other wider existence, telling stories of it, making the ants on the ground long to be winged ants themselves; or thirdly, and most excitingly for the earth-bound ants, he could show them how to grow wings themselves and find their own way up into the bigger better life. It's the kind of thing ants do, after all. So there's an image of how time and eternity might intersect.

Lastly, I'm going to tell a parable. I'm not trying to explain the Prologue of John to you, I'm quite deliberately not giving some scholarly account, I'm giving you images that may give ways of looking at truth from another angle, give an idea of how understanding might begin to grasp things that are only really known by faith. If you read Henry Chadwick or speak with Betsy Livingstone you'll find there's an inexhaustible depth of thinking and revelation below the surface of what we say we believe. It's just like your computer, which runs horrendously fast and complex operations designed by fiendish technicians, or perhaps fiendishly bright technicians; yet what you see on the screen is so simple - just a cursor and words and pictures that allow you to get the results you need.

So let me finish by telling you a parable. I shan't give any explanation, I'll just tell it and stop.

There was a nation in the middle of Europe. It was a monarchy. They'd had a king for as long as anyone could remember, for longer than any records could tell. They traced their king's ancestry back to King Zog 1st, who'd started the royal line off and laid down the constitution. Ever since King Zog 1st the king's eldest son had succeeded to the throne. He became king the moment his father died, and always whenever the king passed away the cry would go up 'the king is dead, long live the king'. Even if the heir was a baby. They'd crown him in the end always, of course, that was when he'd be acknowledged and celebrated as the new king; but he became king the day his father died. Well, the time came in the middle of the 20th century when the people of Zogania wanted a change. They sent the king and queen into exile, and they set up a socialist government.

But things didn't go well, they had revolution after revolution, they stopped winning medals at the Olympics, they had to leave the euro, and so eventually they said, let's bring back the king. But 50 years had gone by. The old king and queen had died in New York, where they'd lived in poverty and exile for a few sad years. Nobody knew what to do. But then something unexpected happened. Did I tell you that the House of Zog all had a distinguishing feature that everyone could tell from a mile off? They all had a huge long chin that had got longer and longer down the centuries. And lo and behold a Zoganian on holiday in New York noticed a street sweeper with the most enormous chin. They swept him up in a big black limousine and they took him back to Europe and they did the DNA testing, and yes indeed this was the son of the last King of Zogania. So they wasted no time, they rushed him to the cathedral, they gave him a shave and put a crown on him

and sang Zadok the priest several times in a row. So at last they had a king again, King Zog 251st, and they could live happily ever after. But when did Zog become King? Was it at his coronation? Or was it on the day his father died? Or was it on the day old Zog 1st, all those millennia ago, devised the rule that the eldest son of the eldest son of the eldest son, you get the drift: was he king even before he was born?

God finished the story and closed the book. 'Now that was a human king, he said. A human king chosen by human rules. If I choose a king, I will do it how I choose, I will choose whomsoever I choose, I will do it when I choose and according to my choice of rules. My ways are higher than your ways, my thoughts than your thoughts. My eternal choices affect the whole of time.' Remember this parable one day over the Christmas season, as you sing the carol 'He is that he was, and for ever shall be, but becomes that he was not, for you and for me'. Even so, come, Lord Jesus. Amen.