

2022 Carol Service (online and in-person) – John 1:1-14 ‘Gravity’

In 1687 the great scientist Isaac Newton published his iconic work ‘Principia’. Among many amazing insights, it is best known for being the first to define from a scientific point of view what we now know as gravity. When I was in primary school, I was told the story that all school children are told, that the insight came to Newton when sitting under a tree one day and being disturbed by an apple falling on his head. Sorry to disappoint you all, but (lovely as the story is) it’s a myth.

The reality is much duller: here is Newton in his own words: “I deduced that the forces which keep the planets in their orbs must [be] reciprocally as the squares of their distances from the centers about which they revolve: and thereby compared the force requisite to keep the Moon in her Orb with the force of gravity at the surface of the Earth; and found them answer pretty nearly.” That probably didn’t make much sense to most of you: **in summary, it means gravity is real.**

Gravity is what you might call one of those universal laws – it’s something we live by all the time. So much so, that we don’t even think about it. If I knock this microphone over, it falls to the floor (as it unfortunately did during a funeral a few years back, leaving me to shout awkwardly at people for the next 45 minutes). If I jump up I land again and don’t keep rising into the sky. Or, to take an extreme example, I enjoy watching the Worthing Bird Man competition, as various people comically try to fly off the end of Worthing pier – the point is, they always crash disastrously into the sea because of – you guessed it – gravity.

Significantly, I think gravity applies in spiritual world as well. It manifests itself in two ways: what I’m going to call the gravity of sin and the gravity of love.

To address the first of those, we have to ask ourselves the question (and it’s a very important question at Christmas): why did Jesus come to earth at all? Not for a holiday, or to find out what these strange beings called humans were like: after all, all the bible insists that he made us, so he knows exactly what we’re like. Nor because it was easy. The great writer C.S. Lewis once observed that if you want to know what it must have been like for the Almighty God to squeeze all that majesty and authority into a human body, imagine what it would be like for you to become a slug.

No, **Jesus came for a purpose: there’s something fundamentally wrong with our world, which needs to be put right.** Take a look around the world and it’s not difficult to spot what it is. Everywhere we look we see the results of human selfishness, of greed, of a lust for power and control, or for excessive wealth and adulation. If you’re a regular here, you’ll have heard me describe humanity (a few weeks ago) as a magnificent ruin – like Fountains Abbey or Macchu Picchu. We’re made (by God) for greatness – to look after the world in his place. But we couldn’t do it – we decided to go our own way, scarring and marring the image of God in us.

And the clearest example of it is that we always diagnose the problem in terms of ‘other people’. The real problem with the world is this person, or that nation. But deep down we know the problem is closer to home. None of us are really all we’re cracked up to be.

Whether it's all the resolutions we break, or the harsh words we can't control or the compulsions we can't resist, or indeed the good intentions we never put into practice, it's there – and we know it. The bible has a small word for this big problem, and that word is 'sin'. It's deeply unfashionable nowadays, in fact modern culture tries to pretend it doesn't exist any more, which *might* be part of the problem – but the easiest way to understand it is simply this: the 'I' is in the middle. How do you define 'sin'? The 'I' is in the middle.

And like physical gravity, it's a fundamental law, it something that just *is*, it's inescapable. Sure, we can make modest changes – but most of the time it's like jumping up – deep down, we know we always come back down again. It's gravity.

So what's the answer? That's the million dollar question, isn't it? Where's the hope? How can we defeat gravity? The short answer is that we can't – on our own. But there is another type of gravity – **the gravity of love**. Not first foremost our love – but the selfless love of God, which always pulls him back to his creation, and above all to his greatest creative work: to you and me, us, human beings. And whilst the root of our problem is undeniable, and what we deserve is our come-uppance, God's character always comes back to mercy, to love. Just like gravity.

Gravity ultimately explains the Christmas story, what we call in posh language 'the incarnation' – i.e. God becoming one of us. It is the gravity of love. As that great passage in John concludes: 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.' Why? To reverse the gravity of sin – Jesus is on a rescue mission, to defeat our fundamental enemy from the inside. He can't defeat sin unless he becomes one of us, lives as one of us and dies on our behalf.

At Christmas we celebrate the special baby: but Jesus doesn't stay a baby forever. He grows up, and his life has one overarching purpose – to reconcile us and God again. It's something only God can do: we can't reverse the gravity of sin, but God's gravity of love counteracts it. As that lovely poem says: 'What force drew him down from above? What force but this: the gravity of love.' What pulls Jesus down to earth into that stable can also pull us into his love and forgiveness. **It's not science, it's grace.**

Story of Christmas is the gravity of God's love: pulling him to earth, into our humanity, out of sheer love for us. This gravity has the power to pull all of us into his love – and I hope that is a message for you today. Do you need God's gravity at work in your life again? **Let him pull you into his arms, and hear his voice saying: I love you. It's that love that pulled him into our world, and can pull us into his.** Amen.