

From a treatise by St Augustine on the first epistle of John

We announce what existed from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, what we have touched with our own hands. Who could touch the Word with his hands unless the Word was made flesh and lived among us?

Now this Word, whose flesh was so real that he could be touched by human hands, began to be flesh in the Virgin Mary's womb; but he did not begin to exist at that moment. We know this from what John says: *What existed from the beginning*. Notice how John's letter bears witness to his Gospel, which you just heard a moment ago: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God*.

Someone might interpret the phrase the Word of life to mean a word about Christ, rather than Christ's body itself which was touched by human hands. But consider what comes next: *and life itself was revealed*. Christ therefore is himself the Word of life.

And how was this life revealed? It existed from the beginning, but was not revealed to men, only to angels, who looked upon it and feasted upon it as their own spiritual bread. But what does Scripture say? *Mankind ate the bread of angels*.

Life itself was therefore revealed in the flesh. In this way what was visible to the heart alone could become visible also to the eye, and so heal men's hearts. For the Word is visible to the heart alone, while flesh is visible to bodily eyes as well. We already possessed the means to see the flesh, but we had no means of seeing the Word. The Word was made flesh so that we could see it, to heal the part of us by which we could see the Word.

John continues: *And we are witnesses and we proclaim to you that eternal life which was with the Father and has been revealed among us* – one might say more simply “revealed to us.”

We proclaim to you what we have heard and seen. Make sure that you grasp the meaning of these words. The disciples saw our Lord in the flesh, face to face; they heard the words he spoke, and in turn they proclaimed the message to us. So we also have heard, although we have not seen.

Are we then less favoured than those who both saw and heard? If that were so, why should John add: *so that you too may have fellowship with us?* They saw, and we have not seen; yet we have fellowship with them, because we and they share the same faith.

And our fellowship is with God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son. And we write this to you to make your joy complete – complete in that fellowship, in that love and in that unity.