

Homily, 1st Sunday after Christmas, December 31, 2017, Emmanuel Episcopal Church

The Gospels give us three Christmas stories. Mark, the earliest of the gospels, skips any mention of Jesus's birth in order to get moving with Jesus' ministry. It's as if there is not a lot of time and the core of the good news needs to be set down quickly. Matthew's gospel, written some years later and with a Jewish audience in mind, emphasizes Jesus' birth as the fulfillment of the Hebrew prophets and shows the gentile world coming to pay homage to the child and encountering the Jewish king who will do anything, including slaughtering little children, to prevent a new king from arising. Luke, writing to a Greek/Roman/Gentile audience (Mary's Magnificat describes "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel") places the birth of Jesus during the reign of Augustus and the governorship of Quirinius and contrasts the earthly humbleness of Jesus' birth with the heavenly celebratory choirs. We're all familiar with the stories – though sometimes we have an inexact grasp of details – because we have all seen them dramatized in Church Christmas pageants and elsewhere.

But the Christmas story we hear today from the Opening of John's gospel strikes us at a different level. There are no baby, no mother and guardian father, no shepherds or angels, no sages coming from afar bringing gold and frankincense. It is not a story that could be turned into a pageant. In the accounts of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke, the great mystery – God's incarnation, the divine made flesh – is hidden in yet revealed through the narrative. All ages, children to adults, can see and hear and respond as their level of spiritual maturity allows. But this prologue to the Gospel of John makes different demands on us: here the mystery of God's incarnation is expressed in language that is at once exciting and befuddling, exalting and frustrating. I think it admonishes us to take it in, and like Mary in the Gospel of Luke, ponder it in our hearts.

One commentator in The Interpreter's Bible says that "this author . . . gives the impression of thinking much faster than he can speak or write; with the result that the reader's mind is overwhelmed by a rush of staggering assertions, at each of which he would like to be given time to pause, and try to begin, at least, to think this out; but none is allowed him, and at once he is swept on and on. The whole thing has the effect more of a piece of lofty music than of literature. It stirs strange feelings and emotions in us that surge up out of the deeps. It creates an atmosphere in which one reads, awed and tense, and with held breath. We know that we are face to face with something august, tremendous, illimitable. But the impression left upon most readers' minds, one fancies, is indefinite and vague; a sense of something very big and very real, but indescribable which will not go into words."

Well, that is a good warning. Maybe better just to let the prologue be there, "tremendous" yet "indefinite and vague." But with all the naiveté of my 80 years, I think something can be said about it that might make sense.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." What does John mean by "the Word"? The Greek translated here as "Word" is "Logos," a term widely used in Stoic philosophy at the time of Christ. It was the creative energy, the form-giving force through which the creator brought all things into being. One can think of it as the

mediator between the ineffable and unknowable Divinity and the created world. John is identifying that creative force with the words God spoke at creation: God said “Let there be light; God said, Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters; God said “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place and let the dry land appear; and so on for the 6 days of creation. We can best think of Logos as God’s formative action that brought and continues to bring all things into being. It is God’s creative power in action.

The Logos can also be thought of as the “Word” of God because it reveals God. It is through the Word that scripture speaks to us, but the Word reveals God in other ways as well, through nature, through our capacity for reason, through moments of fleeting insight into something beyond time, through holding our newborn child, touching one we love, feeling an upsurge of joy for no apparent reason, being gently present at the end of another’s life. These can all be ways the Word speaks to us.

At the beginning of his hymn (and that, I think, is what the prologue to the Gospel is) John says nothing that a 1st century stoic or neo-Platonic philosopher would disagree with. But then he begins to make new claims. The Logos brought life and light and now “The true light, which enlightens everything, was coming into the world.” And then “He through whom all things came into being – this great Word coexistent with the Father – came into the world and gave power to those who received him to become children of God.” The culmination of these radical claims is “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

There is nothing in the other three gospels – the “synoptic” gospels – quite like this. Mark, Matthew, and Luke reveal Jesus as the Son of God implicitly and explicitly. This happens, for example, in the story of the transfiguration when Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah, and God tells Peter, James, and John, “This is my beloved son.” But John does not need nor does he use the transfiguration story. From the beginning of the John’s gospel the Word is incarnate in Jesus Christ and dwells with humanity.

So why is this discussion of Logos important to us? How does it speak to our lives today? The prologue and the gospel that follows spiritualize our sense of Christ. John’s gospel is in many ways the culmination of the 1st century’s attempt to understand the “Jesus phenomenon”: what is the ongoing significance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? The gospel is a clear statement of Christology, the process whereby the followers of Jesus came to understand him as the Christ, the Universal and Eternal. The gospel makes us stretch our concept of Jesus and wrestle with His meaning in our lives. And in the ongoing life of the universe. The Logos – the Christ - is what one writer has called “formative moral energy diffusing itself, without diminution, through space and time.” Teilhard de Chardin, the 20th century scientist and mystic, proposes that the eternal Christ is in every sub-atomic particle in creation. It is a way of saying that the universe is holy, infused with the divine presence which has created it and constantly gives it life. It suggests a view of incarnation which is both unimaginably expansive – as large as the universe itself – and incredibly particular and specific, closer to each of us than our hands and feet. And ethically it denies that God has left his

creation in any way and turned any of it over to us to do with as our egos decide. Paul refers to the church as the Body of Christ, but I think he would agree that the universe, shot through with divine power and love which created and sustains it, is the body of Christ even more.

. By declaring that Logos – God as creative power – has become man, John also declares that there is no separation between the divine and the human. God is not distant; we are children of God through the will of God. It is that sense of ourselves that Paul expresses in the passage from Galatians read today: “God sent his son. . . so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying “Abba! Father!” I believe that this sense of ourselves as the children of “Abba” (which is an intimate term, something like “Papa” or “Daddy”) has the capacity to change our lives profoundly. It begins with something very simple. Where is God when we pray to Him? We tend in our minds to place him in Heaven, a lovely place far away, where He looks down on us benevolently but from a distance. But suppose He is here next to us. Suppose he is holding our hand, ruffling our hair, nodding in understanding and sympathy? Or suppose we imagine him to be everywhere, around us, throughout the universe and yet within us. Suppose in our spiritual ears He speaks, even in silence, and we are able at least for moments at a time to listen. Suppose deep inside us, deeper than our egos can plummet, we discover the Word and realize that we have found our true selves?

Later in the Gospel, facing the agony of his trial and crucifixion, Jesus tells his disciples, “You will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” We are one in Christ, one with each other, one in the Father. If we understand that – if we in some way experience that – the one commandment Christ leaves with his disciples makes sense: “Love one another.”

As the New Year dawns, we could do worse than resolve to devote time to this gospel, reading and reflecting on it prayerfully. It is the gospel that depicts the incarnation as the basis for seeing the universe charged with the presence of Christ, for discovering that we are one with God and with all our fellow creatures, and for recognizing that the essence of our lives is love. (It is probably the writer of this gospel, in fact, who in the 1st Epistle of John, declares that “God is love.”) We live in dark times and we can respond to the world of darkness by opening ourselves in wonder and love to the light that cannot be overcome.

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