

30 December 2018

Christmas I

St John 1

It has long been the tradition within the Anglican Communion that this opening to St John's Gospel is proclaimed on the first Sunday of Christmas, and for good reason. In our homes, and then here in our parish churches on Christmas Eve, we read the Nativity stories as recorded by Saints Matthew and Luke. They emphasize the human side of the story of the birth of Jesus - the interactions between God, the angels, and the well known men and women of that most holy of nights.

St John does not do that, and this morning, for that we are grateful because we need another side or interpretation. He spells out the plan or blue print that God had in mind for the universe, as he retells the Creation saga. As the late Bernard Miles said it better than anyone else, "It was all God's brainwave," and St John makes it very clear that Jesus was there from the very beginning with God. Everything that came in to being - all that is known and yet unknown, all that is seen and still unseen - came into existence through Jesus. This passage is far more important than it may appear at first. It is more than prose so carefully crafted that it seems as if it is poetry. It is at the very heart and soul of our beliefs, our faith, our relationship with Jesus, and our words and actions that arise from our faith. Let's look at this first.

St John makes it very clear that Jesus is co-equal with God. It's the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together, right from the very beginning. St Paul understood this, and because much of our theology comes from a combination of the teachings of Jesus and the applications and theology Saint Paul it is important to us. You and I may not fully understand it, but we live with it and we consider it to be sacred.

But then, a century or so later, an Egyptian priest by the name of Arius proposed something radically different. He began teaching that only God existed eternally, and that sometime prior to the creation of the universe, God created Jesus. Those ideas created a firestorm.

It wasn't that it was merely different confusing from what people had long been hearing. It was the implications. You see, if Jesus was not co-eternal with the father, but created, then those who followed Arius believed they could be just as good as Jesus and equal to Him. We can become divine beings!

In turn, it led to divisions on many different levels. Individuals began competing with each other as to who was the better Christian, and no longer saw themselves as brothers and sisters. Others became depressed because they weren't as good as other members. Others claimed to be spiritually superior to everyone else, and ran roughshod over them. Arianism, as it became known, nearly created a civil war in the Roman Empire around 350, and it is still with us in the false teachings of the Gospel of Prosperity. In my opinion, this false teaching is

always extremely dangerous to everyone. In a few moments when we join together in the Nicene Creed, we are making a statement, even if we don't realize it, that we are rejecting Arius.

There was more for us to consider. Four hundred years before Christ was the age of Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato, and these philosophers were still studied and very influential throughout this region of the world. That was especially true of Plato because he believed that the mind was of the highest value because it was most like an ethereal god who remained staunchly aloof from the rest of the world.

Anything physical was second class - at best. And worst of all was the human body. It was ugly and despicable, and the mind was far superior. The best that a mere human could hope for was to have such a well developed mind that they could think in abstract terms and then create something of beauty.

No follower of Plato would be so audacious as to use St John's phrase - the word became flesh - because that was too humble and too humiliating. The gods and goddesses stay far away atop Mount Olympus, away from grubby human beings. Even their prophets, such as the oracle and Delphi means a long and dangerous journey. A God making taking on human form - disgusting, ridiculous.

You know what, all of Arius and Plato, and countless other philosophers and theologians is just a lot of head stuff. Knowledge is something we honour, but it has some very serious limitations. Sometimes, it gets in the way.

Despite these and other challenges, we cling to the verses and words of this passage, because we stake our very souls upon it. One God in three personalities creating the universe; and God coming to human beings, mere mortals, as one of us. God became human and dwelt here on earth with us so that in turn, we could become more like God.

The practical applications of this are magnificent and frightening at the same time. Instead of hiding behind anything else, we put our emphasis on being ethical people, and in very simplistic terms, it means loving them, caring for them, giving deeply of our time, treasure, and talents for the benefit of other people - locally and then around the world.

And more than anything else, it means all of us make a commitment, each and every day, to be clear examples of God's grace. Forgiveness, rather than carefully cultivating grudges and old animosities, some of which probably date back to before we were born. It's grace that is tolerant of others, even when their ideas are different. Grace that doesn't scold, but invites a person to carefully think about the harm they might be doing to others, and to themselves, and perhaps diminishing their own life. Grace to let them change and grow. Grace that looks beyond what someone is wearing or their hair style, their politics, and everything else - grace so clear and strong that it sees another person as our brother or our sister.

Grace that stays on a track to righteousness, without yielding to the temptation of being self-righteous. Grace that says 'no' to things that are harmful to ourselves, to others, and to the world. Grace that doesn't put up a

lot of rules to exclude people, but tears down walls to include them so that together we can all grow more Christ-like.

Living in grace, reflecting God's grace in our lives is our life's work.

Christmas starts with God's eternal love for the world He created - you and me. And whether you prefer the Nativity stories in Matthew and Luke, or this soaring passage in John, it is for all of us, and it is individual at the same time. For God's love and grace are for all of us. As individuals and as a parish family we can receive God's gifts to us and then, applying them, be instruments of His grace and love in the world.

Our privileged task is to meditate and discern how God wants us to apply His love to the rest of the world.

I find it fascinating. Our Gospel passage for this morning starts us with prose that is so beautiful it is almost poetry. It seems so very abstract, compared to the beautiful stories of the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, but then it leads us to the most important work we can do in our life - apply it and truly become practical, practicing Christians who touch the lives of others. What a magnificent way of truly saying thank you for the birth of Jesus and honouring God.