

The Prologue of John's gospel, which we have for our reading today, is one of the most famous, well-known and commented-on passages in the New Testament. It is like the overture to an opera: it contains all the themes, all the leitmotifs that will emerge as the gospel unfolds. St John's gospel was the last to be written, but by the early fourth century, in the reign of Constantine the Great, it was the most highly esteemed. There are two main reasons, probably, why it came to be so popular: first, it has a highly philosophical, intellectual approach that appealed to Hellenist Christians and Platonists; second, it tells powerful stories about real people and their lives, which attracted the everyday believer. Looking at the material he includes in his gospel, it is clear that the author of John knew about Mark's and Luke's gospel, but not Matthew's; he also clearly had his own sources, from which come the many stories we find in John but not in the other gospels. There are several influences detectable in the narrative, including Greek Platonism, Gnosticism to a much lesser degree, and the teachings of the Essenes. John's gospel is notable for the extended discourses – or teachings – given by Jesus, often following on from a particular story.

It has been suggested by B.H. Streeter, a biblical scholar who wrote in the first half of last century, that some of the material in John's gospel does not come directly from historical 'fact' but from 'inward gazing' or mystical reflection by the evangelist himself. This theory would certainly

account for the difference between the brief, pithy statements of Jesus in the synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke), and the lengthy discourses in John. It would also explain John's abundant use of images – the True Vine for example, the Good Shepherd, Living water, Living Bread. The 'voice' of Jesus in John's gospel is often more archetypal, transcendent or, as John himself would say, a voice 'from above.' Streeter suggested that the stories and discourses may have been 'received' by John in a mystic vision, a kind of theological 'trance.' He said that the authority John relies on when he supplements the synoptic gospels with unique material of his own, may not be traceable to any specific historical sources, but may come from his own intense inner experiences with the Risen Christ. This was never a popular theory – hardly surprising in a world that demands facts, historical proofs and concrete evidence – but I actually find it appealing. From a psychological point of view and in keeping with what we know about the human psyche, it makes perfect sense. From this perspective, you could say that John's gospel is an extended meditation on the life of Christ.

The Prologue may well have been based on an ancient liturgical hymn used in the very early Church. There is a very specific rhythm to the first fourteen verses – which is more obvious in the original Greek; in Greek, the last word of a sentence becomes the first word of the next sentence. For instance:

“In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God. God the Word was.”

This sounds awkward in English, but not in Greek. It sounds like poetry. Verses 6-8 about John the Baptist break this rhythm and, probably, they were a later insertion into the text, either by John himself or someone else. As we noted a little earlier, all the major themes of the gospel are introduced into the Prologue: light and darkness, children of this world and children of light, believers and non-believers, flesh and spirit, the importance of faith in Jesus Christ, the Son's relationship to the Father and, not least, the possibility for each one of us to become a child of God.

When John writes: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” what did he mean by ‘Word’? He uses the Greek term *Logos*, which has a very long, rich and lustrous history. In fact, we don't really have an adequate English equivalent, so we use the same word: *Logos*. Many of the ancient Greek philosophers defined it as reasoned argument, discourse, proportion; others knew it as the principle of order and knowledge; when it entered Jewish philosophy through Philo, it became the ‘uttered word.’ Common to all these, are the concepts of order, reason, wisdom and rightness. St John took this term and applied it to Jesus Christ, through whom creation came into being in an ordered, reasoned, wise and right manner. In this, he was influenced by the concept in Greek philosophy of the indwelling presence of God. A modern scholar writes:

“For John the Logos referred to that expression of God’s innermost nature that poured forth to create and be immanent in the world, giving the world order and expression, and which was most closely to be experienced in the human soul. It was a way of explaining how God, who is transcendent to all creation, can also be within it.”

All that exists came forth from God through his divine Logos: the world-creating Logos can be seen in the movements of the heavenly bodies, in the majesty of the skies, in the great oceans with their abundance of life, but also in the tiniest unit of it. St John would have nodded in agreement with Nikos Kazantzakis when he wrote:

“Everything is God’s. When we bend down to peer at the ant, in his black, shiny eye I see the face of God.”

In view of all this, we can now understand what a stupendous statement John made when he said: “The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us.” The divine Logos through which everything was created, itself became a creature without ceasing to be the Logos.

All this philosophy, all this theological discourse, this word-history and mystical insight – too deep and rich for anyone to fully comprehend in a single lifetime – what meaning does it have for us, now, in our own daily life? Well, it has joyful implications for each one of us. To begin with, if we were created by God through the agency of divine Logos, it means our existence is reasonable; this sounds intellectual and abstract, but it is actually very concrete: it means our

existence has reason and – therefore – purpose. We are not the result of some billions-of-years-ago cosmic burp; we are not infinitesimally insignificant specks in an inconceivably vast and empty universe, each speck alone and friendless; neither are we here to ‘toil and spin’ our way through a brief span of meaningless drudgery. This is a nihilistic view put forward by Macbeth:

“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.”

That we have come into existence through the Logos means, on the contrary, that our lives are willed, have meaning and are purposeful. This is the beauty of it: we are contingent beings – that is, our lives are not necessary – but our existence is nevertheless *willed*. God *wants* us to be.

The Logos teaches us that the creative love of God is not somewhere ‘up there’, above and beyond us, forever out of reach; God through his Divine Word is also immanent, dwelling deep within every human person – in fact, within every created thing. God, to be sure, is transcendent to his

creation, but we do not need to look up to the heavens to find his throne: his throne is our own heart. Every heart.

It also means that life has structure and order. This is sometimes hard to believe – especially in these present times, which are shocking, challenging and, to all intents and purposes, inexplicable. Yet it is precisely in such times that we need to trust even more in the order that God has built into his creation. However much it may sometimes seem to be so, life is not chaotic; even the Coronavirus exists according to its own genetic structure – if it did not, there could never be any possibility of a vaccine, which is manufactured through identifying and responding to that structure.

When the divine Logos assumed flesh and lived as a man in human history, Jesus Christ, his nature was revealed as love: the love of God for his creation, the love he has for each one of us, the love that Jesus commanded us to have for each other. In the final great discourse at the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples again and again that they must love one another and be perfectly made one in that love. There is a story told about St John when he was a very old man living on Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea, presiding over a Christian community there; toward the end he was so weak he had to be carried into the church – and all the time he kept repeating gently, again and again: ‘Little children, love one another.’ Eventually one of his disciples asked: ‘Why do you say that so often?’ And St John replied: ‘It was what the

Master used to say. If it was good enough for him, it is good enough for me.'