

Readings from the Prologue of St John's gospel have been our gospels for this Christmas octave and, at the Mass of Christmas Day, it was given in its entirety. John's Prologue can be very much likened to music: it is like the overture to an opera, containing all the themes that will emerge as the gospel unfolds; it's poetry – which uses all kinds of literary devices, double or triple meanings, symbolism and metaphor – has the rhythm and rhyme of a symphonic poem. It is a contemplative hymn to the Person of Jesus Christ – and like the finest of traditional Orthodox church music, you only have to hear it to be drawn into its slow, holy embrace. The Prologue of St John, like the great *Hymn of the Cherubim* that opens a Byzantine liturgy, breathes, exhales the holy, the sacred in sound. In the earliest days, the Prologue would have been declaimed aloud or even chanted.

It has been suggested by one biblical scholar writing in the first half of this century, that St John's gospel affirms and enriches but does not have its source in simple historical fact – that it is the result of an 'inward gazing' a theological reverie, a kind of mystical contemplation in the heart of the evangelist. The voice of Jesus in this gospel is often transcendent,

archetypal, beyond the merely personal – all the ‘I am’ phrases, found only in John, are perfect examples of this. In a world that demands facts, historical proofs and concrete evidence, many would sneer at this idea, but 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 personal meditation on the life of Christ with a universal meaning.

St John’s Prologue and excerpts from it have been so much at the forefront of the Christmastide readings, because it has one sentence in it that sums up the meaning not only of the Nativity, season, but of all Christian creed and doctrine: ‘The Word became flesh and lived among us.’ Nothing falls outside the embrace of that statement.

For ‘Word’ John uses the Greek term *Logos*. In English, ‘Word’ isn’t really an adequate equivalent. It was already in use long before John and it is a philosophical term that means among other things, order, reason, wisdom, rightness, knowledge, proportion. The function of *Logos* is the ‘right ordering of things’: it is the divine *Logos* that makes acorns

grow into oaks and not sycamores; that ensures cats give birth to kittens and not piglets, that the sea is wet, not dry. It orders and maintains the proper nature of things. 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. 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 stunning 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 really comprehend in any case – what meaning does

it have for us, now, in our own daily life? It has joyful implications for each one of us. To begin with, if we were created by God through the agency of his 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. 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 – our lives are not necessary – but our existence is nevertheless *willed*. God *wants* us to be.

The Logos means 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. In every heart. Here is the real open secret: the Word is *still* becoming flesh and *continues* to live among us. It always will.

The Logos is the will of 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.’