

Christmas Reflections

The Gospel officially assigned for the Christmas Day Mass is the Prologue to John's Gospel (1:1-18) that starts "In the beginning was the Word," and contains the familiar phrase "And the Word became flesh." This is not the Gospel people attending Mass on Christmas morning want to hear. They are interested in the story told by Luke (2:1-14) about a census, travel to Bethlehem, a crowded inn, the birth in a stable and a visit by shepherds. This familiar narrative, read at the midnight Mass, connects us with the Nativity scene in the home, touches the imagination, and appeals to the children. Responding with pastoral sensitivity, many parishes substitute Luke's birth story for John's Prologue at the Christmas morning liturgies.

Nevertheless, the Prologue provides a profound commentary on the true meaning of Christmas that deserves further reflection. Mark, the earliest of the four Gospels, written around the year 70, begins the story of Jesus with his baptism by John. Using Mark as a source, Matthew and Luke, written in the 80s, move back the beginning of the narrative to the conception of Jesus. The Gospel of John, completed in the 90s, using the independent testimony of the Beloved Disciple, begins the story with the pre-existent Word dwelling with God from all eternity.

Scholars disagree on the origin of John's Prologue, but it may have been an early hymn composed by the community of the Beloved Disciple and later put at the beginning of the Gospel. Accepting the hymn hypothesis, the great expert on John's Gospel, Raymond Brown, finds four stanzas with distinct themes in the original version: The Word with God; the Word in Creation; The Word in the World and the Word present in the community of believers. Each of these themes sheds light on our Christmas celebration of the Incarnation.

The first stanza of the Prologue reads: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." We need to remember this is a poetic hymn and not a doctrinal statement. It does echo the first verse of the book of Genesis: "In the beginning, when God created the heaven and the earth." This parallel suggests that the Prologue introduces a Gospel that proclaims a new creation. Christmas is a joyful feast because it celebrates the birth of Jesus, who brings a fresh start for the human family, a new opportunity to fulfill its true destiny. Furthermore, the choice of the term "Word" to describe the One with God from all eternity indicates that God wants to communicate with us, to carry on a conversation, to enter into dialogue. On Christmas we sing a hymn of praise to the God who breaks the silence of the night and speaks a saving word in and through Jesus. The Word present to God from the beginning is now present to us in the infant born in a stable.

The Prologue continues in the second stanza: "All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." Once again, the text recalls the account of creation in the book of Genesis where God speaks a word and creation springs into existence: light, the sky, the earth, plants and trees, the sun and moon, swimming creatures and birds, a great variety of animals and finally humans made in the divine image. The Prologue attributes this creative activity to the Word, who not only created the world in the beginning, but continues to sustain it as its enduring source of life. God is not disconnected from the world or aloof from human beings. Through the Word, God is closer to us than we are to ourselves, as Augustine expressed it. As human beings blessed with intelligence and free will, we can detect the presence of the divine life within us that enters our consciousness as light. The Word that enlivens us also enlightens us. Darkness, however, continues to threaten us. Sin and guilt blunt the power of the life-force and distort the light of consciousness, but they cannot finally prevail over the light.

During the Advent-Christmas season we celebrate Christ as the light of the world, the Lord of the whole universe. We sharpen our awareness of the way the Word is active in our own lives: guiding, strengthening and encouraging us. The season provides an opportunity to identify and name the dark forces that pose the greatest threat to our spiritual well-being. The Prologue reminds us that Christmas is a festival of hope because the darkness cannot finally overcome the light of Christ.

The third stanza of the original hymn deals with the Word in the World: "He was in the world, and the world was made by him; yet the world did not recognize him. To his own he came; yet his own people did not accept him. But all those who did accept him he empowered to become God's children." The Word, with God from all eternity, came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. All people are sustained by the divine life mediated by Christ. Some do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, including the Jewish leaders who sought his death. Many other Jews, and later Gentiles in large numbers, did accept him. Christ shared his divine life and consciousness with them, empowering them to become sons and daughters of God.

The Christmas spirit prompts us to see those who do not share our faith as people of good will, encompassed by God's saving grace, brothers and sisters sustained by the Word, even if anonymously. At the same time, we thank God for Christ, who teaches us that God loves us unconditionally as sons and daughters, apart from our achievements and merits. Recognizing this truth can free us from unnecessary anxiety and enable us to experience true Christmas joy.

The final stanza of the original hymn contains the central Christian belief: "And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth." Here we have the poetic scriptural basis for the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, the core belief that the second person of the Trinity, the Logos, became man by assuming human nature. The passage does not say the Word *entered* into flesh or *abided* in flesh, but *became* flesh. This very realistic expression of the Incarnation rules out all attempts to deny Christ's full humanity, an enduring heresy still alive in the Christian world today.

Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is himself the revelation of God. The Father has found the most concrete and compelling way to address the human family, through a real human being. Jesus himself is the Wisdom of the Father, the concrete form of divine revelation. Moreover, Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord, teaches us that the Father embraces us with unconditional love and that the Spirit lives within us as a source of guidance and strength. The Word became flesh not only to encounter us with the power of his very presence, but also to teach us the deepest truths about human existence.

The Prologue goes on to say the Lord "made his dwelling among us." The Greek word could be translated as "pitched his tent" among us. The book of Exodus instructs the Israelites to make a Tent or Tabernacle where God can dwell among the people. The Prologue suggests that Jesus, who pitched his tent among us, has replaced the old Tabernacle, and remains the primary place for humans to encounter God and to experience divine glory.

Viewed from the perspective of John's Prologue, Christmas appears as a celebration of the divine presence intimately woven into human existence. God is not a mere observer of the human scene, but an active participant in the human drama. The Word has become human flesh, walked our hard earth, and shared our joys and sorrows. Jesus, who is brother to all of us, encourages us to be brothers and sisters to one another. The Word, who fully embraced human nature, calls us to respect our bodies and our physical drives. Christ, who shares our history, enables us to hope that the human adventure will lead to a final fulfillment. Nothing truly human is foreign to Christians who have appropriated the meaning of the Incarnation. A world redeemed by Christ can never be merely the devil's playground, but will always be fertile ground for more powerful grace.

The Prologue, with its soaring poetic beauty, provides an opportunity for a fresh look at our annual celebration of Christmas focused on major Christian beliefs: the pre-existence of the Word, the role of Christ in the creation of the world, and the presence of the Lord in the material world and human affairs. It is especially helpful in establishing a realistic interpretation of the Incarnation, which grounds an appreciation of human solidarity, a healthy sense of human nature, a hopeful assessment of human history and a positive view of the world redeemed by the Word made flesh.