



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, December 27, 2020

Christmas I

+I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

So we all know these much beloved verses from the Gospel of John.

I could almost recite them from memory so many times have I either had the privilege of reading them or have I helped someone else read them for the 9 lessons and carols service that we hold every year. John's very Greek syntax has almost got the better of many a reader.

These verses are the culmination and capstone of that yearly service – and for good reason. They're also the summary of the meaning of all of our readings this morning.

They say some really important things about who Jesus is. In fact, they really are a summary of the point of the incarnation – or the becoming flesh, coming as a human being to us.

And it's rather fascinating that St. John gives us this précis right at the beginning of his Gospel – everything that comes after it kind of fills in the details.

These lines – this prologue - are the pith or the centre of the Gospel.

That they function this way is interesting in itself because that's one of the jobs of a prologue in Ancient near Eastern literature.

Prologues performed a very specific and important role - they projected the plot by explaining both seen and unseen forces within the action.

And in John's Gospel, the prologue reveals the desires and plans of God our Creator.

In this sense, it explains the behind-the-scene activities of God.

What is explained is that “unseen forces” are at work in and around the real events described by the narrative – in and around the apparently simple story of the birth of a baby to poor, refugee parents in a backwater province of the Roman Empire.

This prologue guides the reader (that’s all of us since Jesus’ birth) to see the invisible (that’s God) in the visible (that’s the historical persons and events it describes).

It makes sense of the shepherds and the wise men and the angels and the star.

It speaks of God intentionally and with great love - breaking into this world.

And these verses function, as the cornerstone for the entire gospel, and the lens or the glasses through which the whole of the gospel must be read.

So - what that means is that before we meet Jesus in Jerusalem or in Galilee, we meet him “In the beginning ... with God.”

This isn’t some abstract theological statement, but it’s really essential information that we need in order to make sense of the actual historical person and work of Jesus described in the rest of the Gospel.

In the prologue we learn that Jesus is the Word, the full and final expression or communication of God in word and action (1:1, 18), and we learn that he is the Unique, one and only Son (1:14) of God.

We also learn the basic plot of the Gospel.

Here’s the Cole’s notes or the Sparknotes version of John: creation no longer knows its Creator and is in darkness. But the Light has arrived in the world. The Light (Jesus) will make the Father known to the world.

All of this makes sense of what was revealed in the Old Testament, though now God has been even more loving (1:16-17).

Or, in an even shorter form: God sent Jesus to love us – in order to show us what God’s love looks and feels like and how that love, if we can accept it, and embrace it, can transform our lives and our world.

Now there are so many further things worth saying about these words.

But the verse that captures my imagination today is this:

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

I have always loved the confident note of hope this verse sounds.

On the one hand, it's the declaration of a state of fact: light is stronger than darkness; light dispels and even destroys darkness.

At the same time, it is also a promise: even when it seems otherwise and that the darkness has won and covers the light – and oh boy, haven't our times made it seem that way –

Yet, ... the light continues to shine and the darkness has not overcome it.

There is a quality to this verse that strikes me as accurately capturing our lives.

As Christians, we have been promised and we live confident of the promise that light is stronger than darkness, love stronger than hate, and life stronger than death.

And in fact, as Christians – we tell people that truth. All of us, live and work to make that truth known and tangible and real.

Just as God has revealed in Jesus not only who God is and how God loves us – so do we, Jesus' followers, do the same – we also reveal the heart of God that we have seen in Jesus to all those in our worlds – in our families, with our friends, in our parishes, but most especially important, to bring the love of God close to those whom God in Jesus did – to the widow, the orphan, the poor, the unloved, the marginalized and persecuted, the ignored, the elderly, the shunned.

And that's the sort of love that changes people's lives.

To know that you are a child of God – cherished, cared for, regarded, well it changes how you think of yourself and it changes how you move through this world.

And that's kind of the point of Jesus coming to us.

So that we could know these things - deeply, profoundly, viscerally.

Because of our limitations in understanding who God is, what God is, God becomes human in order that we may see God.

In Jesus, God becomes accessible and understandable to us - the immortal and invisible God became finite and vulnerable – as vulnerable as a baby, born in poverty, to refugee parents, in a poor and oppressed country.

He lived in real time and taught and healed real people. He did all this in order to become truly available to us.

And because we have seen God in Jesus, we are strengthened, we're made bold, both to live with hope as well as share with others the hope that is within us.

So St. John reminds us of God's decision to become one of us, to take on our lot and our life so that we might have hope,

You see, Our lives matter to God. Our wellbeing is of tremendous importance to the Almighty.

There is no worry too small, no challenge too great, that God doesn't share with us.

And because of God's decision to come to us in a way that we recognize – in a way that we can emulate, or follow – then we are empowered to reach out to those around us.

This is what it means to put on Christ, to be formed more and more in the image of Jesus; to be the face and hands of Christ.

That's how heaven and earth are brought together – in Jesus – in that little one born at Christmas.

And it's all this that we pause to celebrate in this season – with our gifts that mirror the wise men's gifts, with our feasts that mirror God's generosity to us, we pause to give God grateful thanks for coming near to us in love – and then we roll up our sleeves and get ready to live the consequences of that love out.

But maybe that's a sermon for next week.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.