

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 5 December

Children's Talk: Seeing the Lord

Many thousands of years ago, people believed in the Lord. But they thought the Lord was so special, so amazing, so powerful, so high above them, that it was wrong to even picture what He looked like. And they thought that if they even saw him, they would be so overwhelmed they wouldn't be able to live anymore. When Moses wanted to see the Lord, the Lord told Him:

You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." (Exodus 33:20)

But then something quite amazing happened: two thousand years ago, a very special baby was born. His name was Jesus. And this is what is said of Jesus:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we saw His glory. (John 1:14)

They saw God's glory in this very special boy! And we know of course what it looked like when He was born: there was Mary, and Joseph, and they placed Him in a manger.

But the story doesn't end there. That boy, who was God-with-us, grew and became an adult, and did and said amazing things. He taught us who God really is and what God is really like. He taught us that when we think of Him, and picture Him, we are thinking of and picturing God Himself. We actually can see the Lord!

Now the Lord won't walk in here. But let's do imagine something. Close your eyes. And picture the Lord. What does He look like? What is He wearing? What is there around Him? What is He doing? Does He say something comforting? Does He reach out His hands? Does He give you a hug? Does He make everything better and fix all of your problems?

God can be all of those things, and is all of those things, and we get to picture Him in our lives doing them. That's not just your imagination. That really is who God is. He really is the kindest and most loving person in the universe, who cares deeply about you and is doing everything He can to help you have a good life.

In the Beginning...

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

5 December, 2021

Every year we pick one of the four Gospels to be the focus of our Christmas sermons. This year we will focus on the Gospel of John. This presents a certain difficulty: John does not speak of any of the familiar elements of the Christmas story. There are no shepherds or wise men in John, no messages from angels, no journey to Bethlehem or manger in a stable. Instead we find an abstract discourse on the nature of God. Yet by exploring this Gospel more closely it will deepen and enrich our understanding of what Christmas is all about. The Gospel of John gives new meaning to the familiar stories we know so well.

The very fact that John's Gospel is not rooted in a historical event is telling. Both Matthew and Luke emphasize the very worldly contexts for the first Christmas. They set the stage by mentioning the reigning monarch Herod, trace Jesus' genealogy from ancient times to the then present day, and Luke even begins by letting everyone know he's going to set the record straight on what actually happened that first Christmas. In short, Matthew and Mark present the Christmas story very much so as an event that took place at a particular time and place, namely, 2000 years ago in the Roman province of Judea.

John skips all of that. Listen to the opening words of his Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (John 1:1-5)

John does not start his story in any historical setting whatsoever. Instead he goes back to the very beginning of time. "In the beginning..." These are the also the opening words of the entire Bible, describing the moments before God even began creation. And what was there, in the beginning? The Word; and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Everything in creation came into being through this Word. What was and is the Word? Well John gives us an indication. He says,

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

The Word, that already existed at the very beginning of time, and through which all things came into being, is also that which was born on the very first Christmas. The very same person who was born in time as Jesus Christ is also the Creator from the beginning of time.

When Jesus was born into the world it was not the case of God *becoming* human. After all, we just read that the Word, which was with God, and was God, has existed since the beginning of time and prior, and it was this Word that took on flesh and lived among us. So again, God did not in one sense *become* human: He had always been human. But in being born on Earth and living as a human, we now can have a concrete image or idea of the humanity of God. The truth of God's humanity

took shape before our eyes, and this is indeed one of the fundamental truths about God: He is human.

And in fact, that is what Christmas is about: the Word, this high, Divine, omnipresent wisdom that is beyond all comprehension, becoming flesh that we can see and understand and relate to. Most faiths will at least describe God in human terms. But in many faiths this is taken to be merely an appearance: God is so far beyond human comprehension that the only way to understand Him is through the metaphor or analogy of being human. As if God decided to pretend to act human for our sake, so we might get a glimpse of what He's actually like or so He could relate to us, and we to Him.

But John is saying something different: he is saying that that which was born into the world as the human being, Jesus Christ, was and always has been a core part of who God is. It is only when we understand the humanity of God that we can understand His nature. Take for instance the truth that God is love: love is something that can only exist in a person. An inanimate object cannot love you. Inanimate objects can make you feel warm, or soft, or safe, or comfortable. But they cannot love you, any more than gravity or electricity can love you. The only sense in which "God is love" has any meaning is if God is a human who can and does love. Love as merely a force of nature, even an all-powerful, all-pervasive force of nature, is empty and dead. The same is true of any other quality we attribute to God: if He is wise, He must be wise in a human way; if He is merciful, then His mercy must be intentional and purposeful, the way it is for us; if He is good, then His goodness must come from real felt love if it is to be meaningful; if He is true, His truth cannot just be dead knowledge, but mindful integrity, as it is with us, or ought to be. (*Divine Love and Wisdom* §286)

The Word is the revelation of this truth, the truth that God is Human. In the case of the opening of the Gospel of John, "the Word" does not just mean the Bible; it is much broader than that. "The Word" here is Divine Wisdom, or Divine Truth. Ultimately any and all truths about God can only be seen if seen in a Divine Human being. That is why Jesus was born: to reveal the truth of who God is. That being said, the Word, as in, the Bible, does the same thing. The Word is a way for us to understand God personally. The Teachings of the New Church point out that this is what all books do: they reveal the hearts and minds of their authors. But if we want to understand the Lord's mind and heart, it is not enough to simply accept the fact that He is the person, Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh; we need to be willing to be moved and touched by what we read, and even more, impelled into action:

All thought, speech, or writing takes its essence and life from the one doing the thinking, speaking, or writing. It has the person in it, along with his character. And the Word has in it the Lord alone.

Still, no one senses or perceives the Divine life in the Word but one who, when reading it, is impelled by a spiritual affection for truth, for through the Word he is conjoined with the Lord. He experiences something inmosty affecting his heart and spirit, which flows with enlightenment into in his intellect and testifies. (*Apocalypse Revealed* §200)

When we read the Word, with the intention of discovering the nature of God, and when we allow His nature to inspire us to grow more and more into His image and likeness, we are encountering the very human God; and in encountering Him and

becoming like Him, we ourselves become more and more truly human. To be human is to love what God loves, to think the way God thinks, and to act how God acts.

John pushes us to realize that when we understand and love the Lord as He appears in the Word, then we also understand the God of the universe. So I want to take this truth, that the Lord is the Word incarnate, and see how it changes how we read other passages, first from the Christmas story and then from other parts of the life of the Lord. Take the most familiar description of Jesus' birth:

And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)

The nature of the God is such that it can be present in the perfect innocence of a little child. In Jesus as a child we learn that He is the very embodiment of innocence, carefully wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger. That nature or quality is central to the nature of God.

In another instance we see the joy that the Lord wants to share, when He told His disciples of His purpose:

These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and *that* your joy may be full. (John 15:11)

If Jesus were just another person it would be quite nice to know that He wanted us to be happy; and if He were an exceptionally wise and kind person, all the better. But from John's Gospel we know that He is not just that, but that He is infinitely wise and infinitely loving; and it is He who wants nothing more than to fill us with His joy. How overwhelming to actually be able to believe that just in some small way: that the God of the universe wants His joy to become our joy.

Or to take another instance, consider the cleansing of the temple:

Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business. When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "*Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.*" (John 2:13-17)

It's nice to know that someone would have that kind of zeal to stand up for us, all the more so if He happened to a particularly powerful individual. But once again, Jesus is so much more than that: in Him we see the deep zeal from which God advocates for us and fights our battles. If God is for us, what can anyone do against us? (Psalm 118:6; Romans 8:31). God advocates for us night and day, through thick and thin, in millions of unseen ways. He is constantly protecting us from spiritual harm, uplifting us, and guiding us towards heaven.

We could look at countless instances of this, of how our viewpoint changes when we realize that Jesus was not just a good and wise man, but that we see in Him the true nature of a profoundly human God. Not only do we see this in reading the Word, but then in our own lives: when we feel the blessings that the Lord gives

us, when we are joyful and happy and content, we can remember that the Lord Himself rejoices with us; He is not indifferent. Not only that, but what we experience is only a small taste of what He longs to bless us with. And then on the flipside, when life is full of sorrow and pain, when we feel like giving up, when we are overcome with despair, the Lord is not indifferent to us then either. In the most human way possible He empathizes with us; He understands our hardship and pain; He joins with us even more closely than at any other time. And, He has the Divine power to change things. Even the greatest of hardships, the ones that seem most intractable and unmanageable, the Lord can overcome. Because He is not merely human, but a Divine human, the Word of God itself made present in our lives, from the very beginning of time and even onward into eternity:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-5, 14)