

WORD PLAY

One of the great highlights of the Advent season is watching our Sunday School students re-enact the Nativity. I remember as a child myself how on Christmas Eve we would have our Sunday School program, receive our goodie bags and go home to open presents. The Nativity play was a central part of that experience.

I read about a Sunday School that was putting on a Christmas pageant which included the story of Mary and Joseph coming to the inn. One boy wanted so very much to be Joseph, but when the parts were handed out, a boy he didn't like was given that part, and he was assigned to be the inn-keeper instead. He was pretty upset about this but he didn't say anything to the director. During all the rehearsals he thought what he might do the night of performance to get even with this rival who got to be Joseph. Finally, the night of the performance, Mary and Joseph came walking across the stage. They knocked on the door of the inn, and the inn-keeper opened the door and asked them gruffly what they wanted. Joseph answered, "We'd like to have a room for the night." Suddenly the inn-keeper threw the door open wide and said, "Great, come on in and I'll give you the best room in the house!" For a few seconds poor little Joseph didn't know what to do. Thinking quickly on his feet, he looked inside the door past the inn-keeper then said, "No wife of mine is going to stay in dump like this. Come on, Mary, let's go to the barn." -And once again the play was back on track!

You may have seen the Nativity play dozens of times but it's moments like this that make it fun.

There are traditionally two gospels from which we get our Nativity scene, but did you know there is a third gospel account? This one is difficult to act out if we take it literally from the text. This third account is found in the gospel according to John and it is my favorite. If we were to give it a name we could call it the Word Play. It is both a play on words and a play about the Word. What is most significant about this Word Play however, is that it lays a foundation for the Nativity and gives us the reason for Christ's coming.

Let's look at this Word Play in John 1:1-5 together and observe the Nativity from Heaven's point of view.

1. The Perpetual Word

John introduces this pageant with a familiar phrase. As the curtain goes up we hear the words, **"In the beginning was the Word..."** (v.1). And with these words John takes us to the beginning, not to when the angel came to Mary, but to the time before time. There is no mistake in that these words remind us of Genesis 1:1 **"In the beginning God..."** for that is what John intended. This phrase introduces the story of old creation and now it also introduces the new creation.

If we pretended to know nothing of whom John was speaking we would first of all realize that this Word, whoever he is, is eternal, perpetual, always was and always will be. Even the insignificant little word "was" tells us that he had no beginning of his own; when other things began, He – was.

But why does John call this person the Word? Why not call him "Messiah" or "the Christ"? John is writing to Greeks and Jews. For both of them this term "the Word" or better yet, "Logos" means something important. A word is the expression of our thoughts; it says in an audible and visible way what is in our minds and hearts. Logos means more. To the Greek thinkers it meant a principle of reason, the principle which gives meaning to the Universe. Logos invokes the deepest thought.

John had this in mind but he also had the Hebrews in mind too. In fact the true meaning of Logos is found in Hebrew revelation. The Word of God in the OT denotes God in action. When God spoke he created, he revealed or he delivered. For example, in Psalm 33:6, **"By the Word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth."** When God spoke it revealed something of himself. So John calls this person in his gospel Logos, the Word, because God is saying something again.

2. The Personal Word

John goes on to describe this person “...and the Word was with God...” (v. 1). The Word is no longer an abstract subject; the Word is now seen as personal. The power that fulfills God’s purposes, the word of his mouth, is the power of a distinct personal being. But he is more than just a word, he is a person and has real existence. He is not a metaphor or personification; the Word is real.

Just like the word “was” meant more than it seemed, here too the word “with” is deeper than we realize from simply reading it. That the Word was *with* God tells us that this person has an eternal relationship with God. The Word is shown to be distinct from God but in very close relation to God. The difference could be seen in our own relationships: I could say I was with my buddy last night and that would suggest friendship, or I could say I am with Sharon, my wife, and that is a relationship that supersedes friendships.

The Word was with God, in relationship to God but separate in terms of person. There is a closeness implied that suggests more than friendship.

3. The Divine Word

Then comes the clincher in John’s description of the Word, “...and the Word was God” (v. 1). He was personally separate from God and yet was very literally God himself. God and the Word are of the same nature, One, yet distinct. This is the greatest of all mysteries and it is one that makes everybody stumble.

This is the stumbling block for Jews, Moslems, Unitarians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christadelphians and for anyone who has difficulty with the virgin birth of Jesus, his deity and pretty much with everything he claimed and did. And when you struggle with this point of Christ’s divinity, that he was and is God, the gospel as a whole is hard to accept.

A lot of things have been said about Jesus, things that only a finite human mind could conceive to try and explain Jesus. Some have said that Jesus was just a good man who was called by God to be the Messiah. Others have said he was just a man whom God poured power into and gave some authority. Some said he was a spirit and not a real man, like an angel or an apparition. So many things have been said to avoid the idea that Jesus was fully man and fully God, and that he was from before the beginning and did not become God but always was God. It’s just too hard to accept.

This is what John says to them, “Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as the coming in the flesh, have gone into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist” (2 John 7). The beginning of belief in Jesus is found in the Nativity, that the Word became flesh.

4. The Word of Wisdom

Scripture clearly shows Jesus as having been before the Nativity and before Creation. John said simply, “He was with God in the beginning” (v. 2). Yet this simple statement is based on a huge fact. This verse recalls what the writer of Proverbs said about Wisdom in Proverbs 8:23-31:

“I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began. When there were no oceans, I was given birth, when there were no springs abounding with water; before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth, before he made the earth or its fields or any of the dust of the world. I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was the craftsman at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind.”

The writer is speaking metaphorically about Wisdom but how can we ignore the comparison to Jesus himself after what we have just talked about? Jesus is the Word God breathed into action to create the world. And then the writer of Hebrews says this: “...but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe” (Heb 1:2).

The last and greatest thing God ever said, the expression of his deepest heart, is found in Jesus Christ. And the wonder of it is that he said it in the form of a tiny baby in a feeding trough in the middle of cow dung and poor circumstances. Hallelujah!

5. The Creating Word

As if to punctuate and emphasize even further the fact that the Word, Jesus, is more than we can imagine, John says it one more time – He is the Creator. “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (v. 3).

He was the Father’s agent in every act of making that the Father ever dreamed of in creating our world. Everything you know of in our world was created by Jesus. And this further proves that though he was a historical man who lived and died in Palestine, he does not belong to the class of created things anymore than God does, because he is God. There is no other way to interpret this for this is what John intended to say.

Why does this matter? Why emphasize again and again this reference to Creation? Because as the Word created in the first place our physical world as we know it from Genesis, he came again to create a spiritual kingdom that would never die. The Creator is at it again.

6. The Word of Life

As the Creator, the Word is naturally the origin of life, as John said, “In him was life...” (v. 4). If not for the Word there would be no animation on this planet, and I don’t mean Mickey Mouse. Life. Every person who has ever walked the soil of this earth owes his or her life to the creating power and sustenance of Jesus Christ. Created things do not have life in themselves but only through the Word of life.

But again, that was part of the first creation, and we are speaking in John of the second. There is living and then there is living. Jesus came to bring life to living, to bring meaning not just surviving, to bring life that is truly life. Jesus said, “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it” (John 5:21). And to whom does he give it? “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24).

People today are still walking around with the uncertainty of life and death hanging over their heads. They live with guilt over the things they have done. Many wonder if God can be known and if there is life after death. They refuse the true message of Christmas and are in fact the walking dead, the very people Jesus came to give life. But it’s too hard to believe that God became flesh and was born in a stable.

7. The Word of Revelation

The Word that is life is the Word that reveals. John said, “...and that life was the light of men” (v. 4). In giving life, He gives the ability to understand life and that is the light of revelation. Every person receives clues from God that the very fact that they are alive is due to the work of the Word. In other words, each of us is given the opportunity to believe in Christ simply because we live.

“For God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). God has taken the

mystery of the universe, the mystery to the meaning of life – our purpose for living – and poured it all into his Son, Jesus, so that we could understand it. That light is within you to shine the true meaning of Christmas to others. We possess that light, and as Abe said last Sunday, when we look past the warts we see in each other a dim reflection of Jesus.

8. The Overcoming Word

Finally, John makes this triumphant statement: **“The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it”** (v. 5). Your footnote in your Bible might say “overcome” instead of “understood” and I like that much better.

Think of a very dark place, the darkest room you have ever been in. Are you there? Now imagine the light of a candle cutting through that darkness. It permeates every part of the room so that darkness actually seems to flee its presence. But what can darkness do to overcome the flame of light? Nothing! Darkness on its own is incapable of drowning out the light. That is the power of the Word, Jesus Christ.

Back in Genesis we read of God creating and what was the first thing we read? **“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep...”** (Gen 1:2). The next thing we read is **“And God said, ‘Let there be light’”** (v. 3). And the light, he said, was good. John compares this physical creation of light dispelling darkness and makes a spiritual point: **“...the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining”** (1 Jn 2:8). Darkness cannot overcome the light and in the meantime the light is growing and spreading. It is also true that the darkness does not understand why this is happening because those who have no faith just don’t understand Jesus.

Conclusion

I read recently about how Japan celebrates Christmas, which has become a major event over there. They put up decorations, exchange presents, send cards, sing yuletide songs, decorate trees, serve special seasonal treats and make a big fuss over St Nick, Rudolph and Frosty. Their Santa is sometimes dressed like a Samurai. It is very important for single adults to have a date for a romantic dinner on Christmas Eve. And for reasons that can’t be determined, a big Christmas tradition is attending a concert of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony. The one thing the Japanese do not do at Christmas is honor Christ. That’s because Japan is nearly 99% Shinto and Buddhist. A missionary to Japan was asked if Christmas was Santa’s birthday. Only ½ of 1% of Japan’s population is Christian. So where do you think they got this commercial version of Christmas? From our North American practices. They are attracted to the glitter and romance of the American version of Christmas, and have adopted nearly everything except the spiritual significance of the season.

The Gospel of John is the Gospel of belief. It was written that whoever reads it might believe that Jesus is the Son of God. So John’s Nativity sets out to show us how Jesus is the Logos of ancient times as well as the baby in the manger. If you have trouble believing in the miracles, the authority with which he preached, how this man dying on a cross brings your forgiveness, and the resurrection, then it is likely that you have never grasped as a reality this incarnation. Once you do believe that God became a man, then all your other faith issues will dissolve.

AMEN