

THE GOOD NEWS OF THE INCARNATION

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Grace Church in New York
Sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas Day
December 31, 2017

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 came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

“In a certain town there lived a cobbler, Martin Avdèiteh by name.”ⁱ

So begins a story by Leo Tolstoy that sheds some light on today’s gospel reading.

Martin had a tiny room in a basement, the one window of which looked out on to the street. Through it one could only see the feet of those who passed by, but Martin recognized the people by their boots. He had lived long in the place and had many acquaintances. There was hardly a pair of boots in the neighborhood that had not been once or twice through his hands, so he often saw his own handiwork through the window. Some he had re-soled, some patched, some stitched up, and to some he had even put fresh uppers. He had plenty to do, for he worked well, used good material, did not charge too much, and could be relied on. If he could do a job by the day required, he undertook it; if not, he told the truth and gave no false promises; so he was well known and never short of work.

Martin had become quite religious, studying the gospels and talking about them with his friends. One day Martin heard a voice in his sleep. Martin! he suddenly heard a voice, as if some one had breathed the word above his ear. He started from his sleep. 'Who's there?' he asked. He turned round and looked at the door; no one was there. He called again. Then he heard quite distinctly: 'Martin, Martin! Look out into the street to-morrow, for I shall come.'

The next morning as he sat working on a pair of shoes and waiting for his mysterious visitor, he saw a beaten up pair of boots outside his window and recognized an old man who was his neighbor. He decided to invite him in for tea. They were both glad for the company. Later that day, he saw a poor woman’s shoes pass by. He looked up and saw that the woman held a baby in her arms, and that they didn’t have warm clothing for the winter weather. He invited them in for a meal and to give them something warm to wear.

After they left, he saw an old woman with an apple cart pass by. As he looked out and watched her, a boy came up and stole an apple. The woman roughly seized him, and Martin ran out and offered to pay for the apple. The hungry boy, forgiven and fed, then offered to help the old woman with her cart. The day was turning to night, and Martin went back inside to continue working. His mysterious visitor never arrived, but he had certainly made a few new friends...

Today’s reading from John’s gospel is often referred to as the Prologue. It’s not only the prologue to the gospel, but it’s the prologue to everything.

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 came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

In Christian symbolism, each of the four gospels is represented by an animal: Mark by a lion, Luke by an ox, Matthew by a person, and John by an eagle. All of them are depicted with wings, but the eagle, with its natural wings, is understood to fly higher than all the others, and early Christians symbolized John's gospel as an eagle because of the heights it reached in proclaiming the good news of Christ. John's gospel is the clearest in depicting Jesus as divine. In the fourth gospel's account of the Jesus' last supper with his disciples, John is depicted as reclining next to Jesus, and according to the Celtic mystical tradition, John heard Jesus' heartbeat and knew that he was hearing the very heartbeat of God. That John so clearly perceived the mysterious nature of Jesus' identity as fully human and also fully divine is why many churches, including ours, have golden eagles atop their lecterns used to read scripture. The other gospels teach us about the life of Jesus, but John teaches us about how Jesus relates to the whole universe.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

By using the words, "in the beginning," John is clearly creating a parallel to the story of creation in Genesis. John takes the reader back to the beginning of everything, before the universe was created. Before the creation, there was only God. But with God was the word. Jesus is this word. And not only was the word with God, but the word was God.

John's gospel was radical, revolutionary. Monotheism was deeply ingrained in Jewish religion and culture. From Deuteronomy, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." This prayer, the Shema Yisrael, is considered by many Jews to be the most important prayer in the tradition. Jesus was a faithful Jew, as were his the majority of his original followers. John's prologue departed dramatically from traditional Jewish monotheism, naming Jesus the word of God and declaring the word was with God in creation and the word was God. Combined with John's narrative, in which Jesus declares himself on many occasions to be divine, this gospel was truly radical.

The conflation of Jesus and God the Father that so confused traditional Jewish monotheism, along with the notion of the Holy Spirit, helped give rise to the development of the theological doctrine of the Trinity. One God, but Three persons. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Or as some have stated it, Speaker, Word, and Breath. The Father is the speaker who speaks creation into being, the Son is the Word that comes from the speaker, containing the idea of creation, and the Holy Spirit is the Breath the gives voice to the Word and that breathes life into the empty void.

So, John helped create a revolution in religious thought, clarifying for Christians the nature of Jesus. But the word gospel means good news. The real question for the church at Christmas is why exactly the birth of this baby such good news? What is the value of this idea of incarnation, that God became flesh and lived among us?

For starters, the incarnation raises the value of human life. In Christ's birth, his becoming flesh, we learn that God values life itself, in all its physicality. This emphasis on the material world is firmly rooted in the Hebrew Bible, but was not shared by the leading philosophies of the ancient Mediterranean, which viewed mind and body, spirit and flesh, dualistically, with the physical world taking a backseat. Human life was already highly valued in Judaism, but as Christianity spread to the rest of the Mediterranean world and beyond, it helped raise the value of human life. In the Incarnation's teaching that God values human beings so highly that he became human, a higher view of humanity emerged in the Western world.

In addition to raising the value of human life in general, Christ's incarnation as a poor child in a colonized land helped raise the status of marginalized human life. Women, children, and slaves were all given elevated status in early Christian communities. Civil rights and human rights have found their origin in Christianity as much as any secular notion of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

But the best news of this good news is not just that we are valued by God in our materiality and in our marginalized states, but that we are in fact gifted by God's presence with us always. When John reclined next to Jesus at the Last Supper and heard in his chest the heartbeat of God, he also heard the heartbeat of a man. Jesus is fully God and fully human. And in his humanity, he raises all us toward divinity. All things came into being through him. Like all the creation, we humans too were created through Christ the Incarnate Word. As God created humankind, the word was there, and the word was God, and as we came into being through him, we were created with a spark of divinity at our core. We too are sons and daughters of God. We are not fully the Word become flesh in the same way Jesus was, but we are flesh infused with the Word.

Martin the Cobbler's story isn't quite finished. When Martin went back inside, he lit his lamps, went back to work on a pair of shoes. When he finished one boot and approved his work, he took down his book of gospels. As he opened it, his dream came back to his mind, and no sooner had he thought of it than he seemed to hear footsteps, as though some one were moving behind him. Martin turned round, and it seemed to him as if people were standing in the dark corner, but he could not make out who they were. And a voice whispered in his ear:

'Martin, Martin, don't you know me?'

'Who is it?' muttered Martin.

'It is I,' said the voice. And out of the dark corner stepped Stepánitch, who smiled and vanishing like a cloud was seen no more.

'It is I,' said the voice again. And out of the darkness stepped the woman with the baby in her arms and the woman smiled and the baby laughed, and they too vanished.

'It is I,' said the voice once more. And the old woman and the boy with the apple stepped out and both smiled, and then they too vanished.

And Martin's soul grew glad. He crossed himself put on his spectacles, and began reading the Gospel just where it had opened; and at the top of the page he read 'I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in.' And at the bottom of the page he read

'Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these my brethren even these least, ye did it unto me' (Matt. xxv).

And Martin understood that his dream had come true; and that the Saviour had really come to him that day, and he had welcomed him.

The Word became flesh and lived among us. Christmas is not just one day in the calendar. And it's not even 12 days. Christmas comes among us every day. Christ is born among us every day. The word becomes flesh, among us and within us. We see the face of Christ in our loved ones, in our neighbors, in the least among us. And as we serve one another, we serve Christ. As Christmas continues for the next six days and as it continues every day of the year, remember that the greatest gift of all is the gift of God's love for us, a love made flesh in the mystery of the Incarnation.

For unto us a Child is born. Come, let us adore him. And let us adore all his Children, our brothers and sisters.

ⁱ <http://www.online-literature.com/tolstoy/2892/>