

24 December 2017

The Christmas Story According to John

John 1:1-14

The Gospel of John does not begin with a story, but with a prologue to a story. We read from the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 1-14.

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

[Enter in simple robe] I thank you, fellow disciples of the Lord Jesus, learned friends all, for this invitation. When I wrote my account of the good news of Our Lord for our little community, I had no intention of stirring controversy, but since that has occurred despite my intentions, I am grateful for the opportunity to explain my book in person. As I understand it, you have two basic questions for me: first, inasmuch as the works by Mark, Matthew, and Luke are already well known to all Christians and are generally used in our churches, why did I feel the need to write another? And second, having chosen to do so, why did I write a book so very different from those earlier accounts? Do I have that correct? Good.

By way of introduction, I must remind you – though I know you are all aware of this – that the Church of Jesus Christ has never had just one form. Indeed in the nearly a hundred years that have passed since Christ returned to the Father, the Church has had many incarnations – if I may be permitted to use that word. It is true that the largest group is the one that began in Jerusalem under the leadership of Jesus' original apostles. It was this "Apostolic Church" that was spread around the world by the preaching of Paul and which has had the largest impact. Unless I am mistaken, all of you gathered here to question me represent that group. So, too, do most of the writings that are used by the Churches. Think about that. What are the texts that we have come to accept as authoritative for the Church? The letters of Paul, the books of Mark and Matthew and Luke, the letters of Peter, the Acts of the Apostles. All of them, *all* of them come from the Apostolic Church. There are no writings from the church in Ethiopia, though that

community has been thriving for generations already. There are no writings from the Samaritan church. Nor are there any writings from the community of believers that I represent.

It is partly for that reason that I chose to write a new book: because future Christians should know that there was more than one sort of Christianity from the beginning, and the churches were not all alike. The small Christian community that I represent has always been distinct from yours, but it is just as ancient. Our founder may not have been one of the twelve disciples that Jesus chose in Galilee, but he knew the Lord as well as they did and, I feel compelled to say, was loved by Jesus every bit as much. Moreover, the community that he gathered around him once he left Jerusalem has always followed a different path from the apostles.

Let me illustrate. In your branch of the Church, the Apostolic Church, the primary issue for most of your existence has been what to do with Gentiles. All the original apostles were Jews, and you began as a sect of the Jewish faith. It was only when Paul began preaching to the Gentiles that you began to grapple with the question of whether Gentiles could be part of the Church and to wonder if they had to follow the Jewish law. I think it is fair to say that that question lies at the heart of nearly all your writings. Paul, in particular, could talk of little else. But the inclusion of non-Jews has never been an issue in our community. From the very start, we have had Samaritans and Gentiles worshiping side by side with Jews. So I wrote my account of Jesus' life to look at a larger issue: not *Can Gentiles be saved?* but rather, *How does the work of Christ bring salvation to the world: to all nations, languages, and tribes?* Because, as we teach, the reason that God sent his only Son into the world – not just to one people – was so that the world might be saved through him. For this reason, I did not emphasize Jesus' earthly form and language and nationality. Yes, he was a Jew, but so what? Every human is from one people or nation or another. If he were not Jewish, he would have been something else, and that wouldn't have mattered either. Instead, I wrote about him as the living incarnation of the eternal Spirit of God.

This leads me to your second question: why my book is so different from those of Mark, Luke, and Matthew. To put it simply: times have changed. The issue that the first apostles spent their lives on – how Jewish must the Church be – is no longer significant. If I may say so, that particular horse has already left the barn. Are any of you sitting here from Jewish families? I didn't think so. No, the Church has a very different and very serious new issue to deal with now. Among the Gentiles who have been drawn to Christ are many Greeks who see the Church as little more than a way to present the philosophy of Plato. As you all know, Plato taught that the material world was simply an imitation of reality, that true reality existed in the realm of ideas. Matter, Plato taught, is weak and temporary and evil; only ideas are eternal. People who have been brought up thinking that way are now questioning some of our core doctrines. I have heard people in churches, trained as Platonists, suggesting that Jesus could not have *really* been human. To take material form would be beneath the dignity of eternal God. He must have simply assumed the *appearance* of humanity. Furthermore, they say, he could not have suffered and died. God must be immutable, perfect, untouchable. My friends, we know better. I suspect that

everyone in this room has spoken with someone who knew Jesus in the flesh. Why, the founder of our community was at the foot of the cross; he *saw* him die. And he felt his physical form after he rose. We have an illogical faith – that Jesus the Christ was both God *and* man – and we must not permit that faith to be politely explained away by genteel philosophers. If Christianity becomes no more than a philosophy or a moral system, then we have lost everything. If we forget the fleshly life of Our Lord, then we lose our soul. Truly truly, I say to you, anyone who denies that Jesus came in the flesh is nothing more or less than the anti-Christ.

This is why I began my book as I did. Mark began the story of Jesus with John the Baptizer, and Matthew and Luke told the stories of Our Lord's miraculous birth. All are excellent in their own way. But I wrote for the world, and I wrote to deal with a new problem facing the church. First, I described the reason that God sent his Son – the eternal principle of light in darkness, which is for the whole world. I even used the Platonist's term for that eternal principle – *Logos, Word – In the beginning was the Word*. The philosophers should like that. But having said that, I then concluded with the key to the entire story: *And the Word – the Logos, the eternal Spirit of God – became flesh and dwelt among us*.

My friends, I have written the good news of Jesus for a new generation, and – I hope – for generations yet to come. I have written not to fight the old battles of Moses versus Christ, Law versus Grace, but rather to make clear the central miracle – that the Creator brought salvation to us, the Creation, *in person*. This is the good news for every age, and when we understand that, then indeed we can understand that God is Spirit and is to be worshiped not in this place or that, not by this pattern or that, not in this church or that, but in all places and among all people, in spirit and in truth.