

Bible Study for Advent B3 , John 1:1-18 – The Incarnation of the Word Made Flesh, The Word of God



*The Adoration of the Christ Child by Zanobi Strozzi
(Florintine Miniaturist and Illuminator, 1412-1468)*

Discussion Questions:

1. When you read about “The Word of God” in the Bible, what comes to mind? Read Mt.4:4, 15:6, and Mk. 7:9-13. Now compare those verses with Lk. 3:1-2, 5:1-3, and 11:11-12. And finally, what does “The Word of God” mean when we get to John?
2. How is Jn.1:1 connected to Gen. 1:1? How is this reconfirmed in Jn. 1:10? You may wish to read Jn.8:49-59 (and parallels to Ex. 3:11-14) as well as Jn. 17:1-5.
3. When “the Word became flesh” (see Jn.1:14) what does that mean to you? How does this relate to Jesus being “very man and very God”? (Nicene Creed, Paragraph 2, Line 5)
4. Review Jn. 1:14, 18. How does this relate to Icons?
5. What is the cosmic dimension of the Incarnation?

Jn. 1:1 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. ¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, ‘This was he of whom I said, “He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.”’
¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

Reflections: Many scholars have noted that John starts his Gospel with the same three words as we find at the Beginning of Genesis. This term, “in the beginning,” whether in Hebrew or Greek was often used to denote concepts of eternity. So the Word is associated with a concept of creator, rather than that which is created. Of the four Evangelists, this aspect of the eternal nature of the Christ comes out most clearly in John’s Gospel. Jesus refers to this “before time” nature of His existence at various points in John, such as when so many of the Disciples get ready to desert Him in Jn.17:1-5, and Jesus talks about ascending to where he was before His earthly existence. Another point where John links this eternal nature of Jesus with that of God himself, is with the strange turn of phrase “before Abraham was, I am” (see Jn. 8:58). Connections to the way God identifies himself to Moses in Exodus as “the great I am” (see Ex.3:14) seem inescapable (Barnes, 263, 1).

The Word of God (in Greek λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ - pronounced “*Logos tou Theou*”) was reasonably cut-and-dried for Jews who were familiar with the Old Testament. It had a significance similar to what we studied last week, when we talked about “the Way of the Lord” as being the commandments of God. Similarly, “the Word of God” for Jews of Jesus’ day pertained to the law of God that was found in the Torah. But, just as “the Way of the Lord” means something much deeper and more mystical in the New Testament, so the meaning of “the Word of the God” also changes when we move from Old Testament to New. Here are some verses that I was able to find in the Gospels which pertain to the Word of God:

*Mt. 4:4 But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every **word that comes from the mouth of God.**'"*

*Mt. 15:6 ⁴For God said, “Honour your father and your mother,” and, “Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.” ⁵But you say that whoever tells father or mother, “Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God”, then that person need not honour the father. ⁶So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void **the word of God.***

*Mk.7:9-13 Then he said to them, ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! ¹⁰For Moses said, “Honour your father and your mother”; and, “Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.” ¹¹But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, “Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban” (that is, an offering to God)— ¹²then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³thus making void **the word of God** through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.’*

OK, so far so good. In these verses from Matthew and Mark, it would still seem that we are talking about the Word of God as being God's laws. And the Jews would have been very familiar with those laws. But then, when we get to Luke's Gospel, something starts to happen. The meaning of "The Word of God" seems to get a little broader. Observe:

*Lk.3:1-2 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, **the word of God** came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*

*Lk. 5:1-3 Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear **the word of God**, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.*

*Lk. 8:11-12 'Now the parable [of the sower] is this: The seed is **the word of God**. ¹²The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.*

So, in Luke, we get a view of the Word of God which is much more mystical than just the laws of God. In Luke Chapter 3, we see the Word of God as something that causes prophesy, and which compels action. In Chapter 5, were the people pressing in to hear the words which Jesus spoke, or when they were they actually listening to "the Word of God" in the **person of the Christ**? And lastly, in the parables of Luke 8, the Word of God becomes something that actually resides in peoples' hearts.

Finally, of course we get to John. And the meaning of "The Word of God" becomes very mystical indeed, linked not only to the person of the Christ as He walked among us and taught us. In John's Gospel, we find that The Word of God is also that person of the Trinity who was actually with God before creation "in the beginning" (see also BCP, 868 II). Can you see how the meaning of "The Word of God" deepens and grows as we travel through the Gospels?

During the history of the Church, we can really find four different things that "The Word of God" has meant to Christians. These are (1) the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, (2) The Holy Scriptures, (3) The preaching of the Christian Gospel, and (4) the Sacraments.

Luther recognized all four of these dimensions of the Word of God at the outset of the Protestant Reformation, and certainly did NOT see the Word of God as being a static concept, but one which was ever growing and advancing (Van A. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms*, 252). I like the way Karl Barth views the Word of God. Barth believes we should consider 3 concentric circles. The outer-most circle is the Christian Church, which represents the **Word of God Proclaimed**. We experience this proclamation of the Word of God through the preaching and the sacraments of the church. Inside this large outer circle, Barth views a smaller circle which is the **Word of God Written**. This, of-course, is our Old and New Testaments, which our 39 Articles profess “containeth all things necessary for salvation” (BCP 868.V1). Finally, there is the inner-most core circle for Barth which is the **Word of God Revealed**. And He is, of-course, the Lord Jesus, who is the heart and soul of all the rest (Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/1, 2nd Edition, 88-124).

In Jn. 1:14, when John says “the Word became flesh,” this really encapsulates the miracle and mystery of the Incarnation. Theologians have been struggling with this for millennia now. In 430 AD, Cyril of Alexandria may have come closer to it than anyone else. He wrote that there was no “giving up” of either the divine or the human in the miracle of the incarnation, “but rather that the divinity and humanity, by their inexpressible and inexplicable concurrence into unity, have produced for us the one Lord and Son Jesus Christ. It is in this sense that He is said to have been born also of a woman after the flesh, though he existed and was begotten from the Father before all ages” (see Alister McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 264).

The Incarnation of The Word of God brings to the believer in the beautiful person of the Christ, a God who – for the first time in the history of the planet – mankind could truly love. With the miracle of Bethlehem, the Creator has a voice, a face, joy, and pain. He both rejoices and weeps with His people, and receives back from us the love that He so freely gives. It was a natural outgrowth of this lovely human-ness that the Church should develop its Iconic images of Jesus. The Icon, much maligned and misunderstood by the Western Church as an Idolatrous image, was actually for the Eastern Church the main instrument of contemplating the perfect union of human and divine in the image of the Savior. Through these images of an earthly Jesus in the Icons of the church, the worshiper is believed to have a window opened into heaven through which he might catch a glimpse of the divine. John of Damascus, writing in the 8th Century AD explains with joy that “Now that [The Lord] has made himself visible in the flesh and has lived with people, I can make an image of what I have seen of God...and contemplate the glory of the Lord, his face having been revealed” (McGrath, 275). Never was any holy article of Christian worship so misunderstood by the wider church than the great Iconic images of the Christ so beloved by our Orthodox brothers and sisters.

Lastly, I would for a moment dwell on the larger picture. As we revisit the manger at Bethlehem this Christmas, and the humble sweetness of The Lord's Birth, I think it is a mistake to miss the power and the majesty of what is happening there. Like a pebble thrown into a pond, there are ripples that spread from that lowly cattle stall, waves that actually rock the earth to its very core. With the coming of the Christ Child, man has indeed been granted a new universe filled with freedom, and healing, and hope. What was old has **already** been made new, and our own world has forever changed. Death is vanquished, sin has been washed away, and the promise of the ages for which the world has long awaited has been gloriously fulfilled. Remember that even while the baby peacefully sleeps in the straw of the manger, there are angels overhead, and all the heavenly hosts are ecstatically rejoicing at the event which has come to pass.

In keeping with this emotion, I leave you with poetry written at the dawn of the Protestant Reformation by a Catholic Priest. Gloria in Excelsis Deo! J. Barnhill, 12-13-11

"Rorate coeli desuper" ("Drop down O dew from Heaven" *) by William Dunbar (died 1513(?))

Heavens, let loose your balmy showers!
For now is risen the bright day-star,
From the rose Mary, flower of flowers:
The clear Son, whom no cloud devours,
Surpassing Phoebus** in the East,
Is coming from his heavenly tower: *Et nobis Puer natus est. (And a son is born to us)*

Archangels, angels, and dominions,
Thrones, potentates, and martyrs various,
And all ye heavenly operations,
Star, planet, firmament, and sphere,
Fire, earth, air, and water clear,
To Him give loving, most and least,
That come in to so meek manner; *Et nobis Puer natus est. (And to us a Son is born.)*

Sinners be glad, and penance do,
And thank your Maker heartily;
For he that ye might not come to
To you is coming full humbly
Your souls with his blood to buy
And free you of the fiend's arrest--
And only of his own mercy; *Pro nobis Puer natus est. (And for us a Son is born.)*

* See Is. 45:8; ** or the sun

All clergy do to him incline,
And bow unto that babe benign,
And do your observance divine
To him that is of kings King:
Incense his altar, read and sing
In holy church, with mind digest,
Him honoring above all thing; *Qui nobis Puer natus est. (Here to us a Son is born.)*

Celestial fowls in the air,
Sing with your notes upon height,
In firths and in forests fair
Be mirthful now with all your might;
For passed is your dismal night,
Aurora has the clouds pierced,
The Son is risen with gladsome light, *Et nobis Puer natus est. (And to us a Son is born.)*

Now spring up flours from the root,
Revert you upward naturally,
In honor of the blessed fruit
That rose up from the rose Mary;
Lay out your leaves lustily,
From dead take life now at the least
In worship of that Prince worthy; *Qui nobis Puer natus est. (Here to us a Son is born.)*

Sing, heaven imperial, most of high!
Regions of air make harmony!
All fish in flood and fowl of flight
Be mirthful and make melody!
All *Gloria in excelsis* cry!
Heaven, earth, sea, man, bird, and beast,--
He that is crowned above the sky, *Pro nobis Puer natus est! (And for us a Son is born.)*