

Hy 17:1,2,3,4,5,6
Ps 43:3,4
Ps 76:1,2,5
Hy 15:1,3,4
Ps 74:3,6; Hy 16:1,2,3,4
Jn 1:1-18
Ezekiel 44:1-4
Jn 1:14a

Yarrow, December 25, 2009

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

I have today a question for which we all need to have an answer. The question is this: does Jesus Christ belong on the same shelf as Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster and the like? You will understand: Buddha, Krishna and Zoroaster are gods from heathen religions.

I don't suppose any of us really find the question all that difficult. We've been taught over the years to believe that Jesus Christ is not comparable to any other god; Christ is unique. And so it is. But can you, beloved, explain to me in what way Jesus is unique? Can you show to an adherent of the Buddhist faith why Jesus Christ cannot be placed on the same shelf as his Buddha?

I fear that the question is important, very important. The world around us increasingly believes that all religions are, in the final analysis, equally acceptable, that each religion leads you to God through its own tradition. For the Christian, Christ is the way to God, for the Buddhist Buddha brings you to God, for the Hindu Krishna is the way. No Christian should therefore criticize the Hindu, nor should Christians engage in mission work amongst the Hindus. The Christian ought instead to promote understanding of others and tolerance for their traditions.¹ So Christian symbols ought no longer to dominate Canada's landscape either....

In this Christmas season, when all the world speaks of the brotherhood of mankind and goodwill between races and religions, I proclaim to you the *difference* between Christ on the one hand and any other saviour of any other religion on the other. I do so because of what the apostle John writes about the birth of Jesus Christ. Christmas, says John, is this: "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us." It's this good news of God's work in Jesus Christ at Christmas that spells out the radical difference between the gospel of the Bible and any other religion. I summarise the sermon with this theme:

IN JESUS' BIRTH GOD HAS COME TO LIVE WITH SINFUL PEOPLE.

1. Who was born,
2. Why He came

1. Who was Born

We read together the first part of John's first chapter. It will have struck you that John does not mention the crib of Bethlehem by name. We read nothing of Joseph's and Mary's romance, nothing of the angel's instruction to Joseph to marry his pregnant fiancée, nothing of their trip to Bethlehem, nothing of the stable or the angels in the field or the shepherds. In fact, there's nothing here that stirs the imagination, nothing that warms up feelings of empathy for the poor couple who became parents in a stable.

¹ See Erwin W Lutzer, *Christ among other gods* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), pg 11ff.

That's not to say that John didn't know a thing about the events of Bethlehem. Rather, John's emphasis lay elsewhere. John's intent was to show his readers something of the glory of Christ.² To do that, John doesn't tell his readers the details of Christmas; he tells us instead *what Christmas was all about*.

What, says John, was Christmas all about? Vs 14: "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us." In the earlier verses of the chapter, John has told us what he meant by the concept "Word"; "the Word became flesh." In vs 1 John wrote concerning the Word this: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Here two things are said of the Word. On the one hand, the Word is not identical to God, for John says that "the Word was *with* God," was near to God, beside God, facing God.³ At the same time, this Word is *identical* to God, for John says that "the Word was God." So fully is the Word true God that –John writes– "all things were made through Him" (vs 3). This is the Creator, the One who spoke and the worlds came into existence (cf Gen 1; Ps 33:6). The Word is the Almighty, is God. Two realities: the Word is God, yet is not identical to God.

No, beloved, I cannot understand what John writes here. To me it's contradictory that the Word is God, and yet is not to be identical to God. We are faced here with the incomprehensible reality of the Trinity; God is one, yet He is more than one. The One who became flesh is true God, the only God, the Creator. Yet He is not to be confused with God Himself; He is to be differentiated from God – He was "with" God. We stand before a mystery that we cannot understand. And *that's OK*, for your God is so infinitely great that He can be beyond human comprehension – one, yet more than one. It's His very greatness that makes Him worthy of worship, and reminds us that we're safe in His hands. So we believe, and adore.

Concerning this Word –He is true God, yet is not identical to God– concerning this Word John says in our text that He became *flesh*. The word 'flesh' captures the notion of finiteness, of being limited, of being affected by the fall into sin.⁴ In the words of Isaiah 40:

"All flesh is grass...,
The grass withers...,
Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass" (Is 40:6f).

"Flesh" is not an honourable thing; to be flesh is dishonourable, dishonourable because it captures a condition not made by God. God in the beginning made all things perfect, good, very good. But 'flesh' is weak, is touched by sin, corrupted. No, to be 'flesh' is not honourable (cf Phil 2:7).

"The Word became flesh," writes John. "The Word" is God, "flesh" is man. "The Word" is the almighty Creator of heaven and earth, the One who spoke and the stars and the rocks and birds and the beasts were there. "Flesh" is the fallen human race, is persons susceptible to sickness and dying, persons who transgressed the command of God and so brought upon himself the sentence of death. The contrast between the two concepts could not be more radical! Almighty Creator, God Himself – finite creatures broken by the fall into sin: no, how could the contrast possibly be greater!!

But see now how John ties these two thoughts together, beloved. He speaks of "the Word" and he speaks of "flesh", and ties the two thoughts together with the word "became". John does not say that "the Word" hates "flesh", does not say that "the Word" is superior to "flesh", does not say either that "the Word" won't have anything to do with "flesh". He says instead that "the Word *became* flesh".

Yes, with that little word 'became' John sends our thoughts to the manger of Bethlehem. Yet John would not have us look at the little baby lying in that manger as if the child were but one in

² See J Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1930), pg 254f.

³ AT Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), pg 622f.

⁴ Schweizer, sarx, in TDNT, VII, pg 123ff.

a dozen. Certainly, the naked eye sees nothing else in the Child than simply a child – no different from any of the children born in the congregation this year, no different from any child born anywhere in the world. Yet John would have us know that this little baby is different, so very different from any other child ever born. Yes, He’s “flesh”, affected by the fall into sin, subject to sickness and pain and sadness and corruption, subject to death itself – like anybody else. Yet He’s different, radically different, because this Child’s *origin* is from heaven. Specifically, this Child is different because this little baby *is* God! John takes us by the hand to the manger of Bethlehem, and he bids us behold the Child, and he tells us that the Child wrapped in swaddling clothes is “the Word” who was “in the beginning,” is “the Word” who “was with God from all eternity,” yes, who Himself “is God.” This Child, says John, is different, absolutely different from any child born in our families, different from any child born in a palace, different even from any child conceivably born to the Dalai Lama. This Child is *God*, is God come in the flesh, the Creator of the world become a creature!

We understand: here is a marvel beyond what words can describe! The “Word”, Himself God, always with God, is pleased sovereignly to lay Himself in a crib as a helpless baby, as flesh touched by the effects of the fall into sin!! Here is a marvel, a riddle no flesh can explain. How could the Son of God do that! Truly, it’s beyond, so very beyond comprehension! My imagination cannot begin to grasp the holy riddle that is Christmas. I can do nothing else than marvel at the glorious miracle, marvel and adore as I see in my mind’s eye a child in a manger, a Child who in fact is the Word-become-flesh.

But if John’s description of Bethlehem, beloved, is correct –and it is, for God has spoken– then it certainly will not do for any one to consider the Child in the manger to be but an average, normal child. Yet that’s precisely what happens when the nativity scene is re-enacted today, be it through setting up a shed with a manger in the shopping centre or through making a drama of the event. But tell me this: how can one ever, be it through pictures or through drama, do justice to the glorious words of John in our text: “the Word became flesh”? Make no mistake, brothers and sisters: any attempt to depict for the human eye what happened at Christmas is going to do great injustice to the marvel of Christmas, is going to take away from the glory of Christ’s incarnation. And that plays into the hand of the world’s insistence that Christ Jesus belongs on the same shelf as Allah, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster and the like! Let it be fixed in your minds, beloved: John 1:14 proclaims the utter impossibility of seeing a simple, average, normal baby in the crib of Bethlehem; John 1:14 proclaims that Jesus Christ cannot be placed on the same shelf as the gods and saviours of man-made religions.

2. *Why He came*

We move on to our second point. What was behind the Word becoming flesh? What task does the Word have in the flesh? To put the question differently: what, really, is lost if we make the Child of Bethlehem a child like any other? Is there any real value for us today in the fact that “the Word became flesh”, God in heaven became a broken man? The answer to the question lies in the next words of our text: “and dwelt among us”.

The word John uses here for “dwell” is striking. John has taken the noun ‘tabernacle’ and made a verb out of it; he says that “the Word” who “became flesh” “tabernacled among us”. It’s an interesting word. Why would John say of the Word-become-flesh that He “tabernacled” among us? Why not the word ‘settled’, or even ‘lived’? To answer the question, we need to appreciate the significance of the tabernacle of the Old Testament.

It pleased the Lord God to establish His covenant of grace with Israel at Mt Sinai (Ex 20). After that covenant was ratified (Ex 24), the Lord told Moses, “...let [the people] make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show you, that is, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, just so you shall make it” (Ex 25:8f). The book of

Exodus details exactly how the Lord wanted Israel to build this tabernacle for Him, tells us also that Israel built a tabernacle for the Lord according to the instructions Moses received.

We are to realise that the tabernacle involved a surprising miracle. When God had come down to the people on Mt Sinai, He had told the people that they had to “consecrate” themselves, had to wash their clothes, had to prepare themselves three days to meet the Lord (Ex 19:10ff). The whole point was: Israel was a sinful nation, while the Lord was holy; Israel was “flesh”. The people themselves realised how different they were from God, for once God came in His majesty and holiness, once the people saw the smoke and heard the trumpet blast and felt the earthquake, they begged Moses please to let God speak not to them but to Moses alone. The infinite distance between the holy Creator and this sinful people made the people most fearful of the presence of God on the mountain. ‘God’ and ‘flesh’ contrast; ‘flesh’ cannot exist in the presence of God.

Yet it was God’s will to dwell with His people. So it was that when the tabernacle was completed, the same holy God Who had come to Israel in the thunder and smoke and glory of Mt Sinai moved into the tabernacle (Ex 40:34). Though heaven was His throne and earth His footstool, though God Himself filled all the heavens, He was pleased to make His home in the midst of one of the peoples of the earth; He ‘tabernacled’ among them – right there in the middle of this sinful people of flesh at the foot of Mt Sinai!

Why God did so? By dwelling in their midst, the Lord sought to impress upon Israel that He really was *their God*. As He Himself said in Ex 29: “I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that *I am the LORD their God*, who brought them up out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them. *I am the LORD their God*” (vs 45f). God’s tabernacling amongst His people was meant to instruct His own of His covenant faithfulness. So He spoke to them from out of the tabernacle, gave His people His instructions, His revelation. This was *His* people, He was *their* God, and the tabernacle was the place of communication between God and man. That’s also why the tabernacle included the altar; the covenant between God and man was possible because of the forgiveness of sins.⁵ Yes, the fact that God tabernacled among His people in the Old Testament was very much a marvel. Holy God in the midst of sinful men: this was gospel.

But –and this point is critical for appreciating our text– God’s presence with His people did not last. In the course of years, the tabernacle was replaced by the temple Solomon built (I Kings 8), and holy God was pleased to live with His sinful people in that temple. But the people were so unfaithful to God that God ultimately moved out of the temple. That’s what Ezekiel saw in the vision God showed him. Ezekiel 8 describes the sins of the people – transgressions so wicked in God’s eyes that God from now on refused to hear their prayers (vs 18). As a result –says 10:4– “the glory of the LORD [that’s the Lord’s presence] went up from the cherub, and paused over the threshold of the temple.” We need to realize: this is God’s presence moving away from the cherubim in the Holy of Holies, and pausing to rest at the temple’s threshold. Vs 18 continues the development: “Then the glory of the LORD departed from the threshold of the temple and stood over the cherubim. And the cherubim lifted their wings and mounted up from the earth in my sight. When they went out, the wheels were beside them; and they stood at the door of the east gate of the LORD’s house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.” God’s presence moved from the threshold to the east gate of the Lord’s house; God moved *farther away* from the Holy of Holies where He’s dwelt all these years. Ezek 11:23 continues the account of the departure: “And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city [ie, from the temple], and stood on the mountain, which is on the east side of the city” (11:23).

That is: *God has left His temple altogether!* At Mt Sinai the Lord God Almighty was pleased to come and live in the midst of His people, but by the time of the exile from the Promised Land the wealth of Mt Sinai was undone; Israel’s hardness in sin meant that holy God could live

⁵ Craig Koester, *The Dwelling of God: the Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental Jewish Literature, and the New Testament* (Washington: the Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1989), pg 6ff.

with His people no longer! Horror of horrors: *God has departed* from His covenant people, so that there is no voice from God, no word anymore.... That is: the symbol of God's covenant faithfulness has been taken away from God's people, taken away because of the hardness of the hearts of the people! The symbol of God's covenant faithfulness, His presence in their midst is removed, so that the people are left without God's word to them in the tabernacle, left without being allowed to see the gospel of forgiveness of sins as proclaimed through the sacrifices.

That's not to say that God disowned this people, broke His covenant with them completely. No, His living with them as a symbol of His covenant was taken away. And so the people were poor, so poor because of their own sinfulness.

But see, congregation: the same Ezekiel who had to announce the tragic news of God's departure from the midst of His people also could announce the gospel of God's return! Turn with me to chap 37:27f. There the same God who departed from the temple makes this promise: "My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed I will be their God, and they shall be My people. The nations also will know that I, the LORD, sanctify Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forevermore." In other words: God's departure from Israel is not definitive; He fully intends to return to His people-by-covenant!

In the following chapters of his prophecy, Ezekiel was shown a vision of a new temple. Chap 44 tells us of God returning to the temple. Vs 4: "He brought me...to the front of the temple; so I looked, and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord; and I fell on my face."

Well now, *John 1:14 records, beloved, the fulfillment of this prophecy!*⁶ Though a new temple had been built in Jerusalem after the return of the exiles from Babylon, we do not read in Scripture that the Lord returned to that temple. It isn't until the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem that God comes again to His people and 'tabernacles' in their midst.

How full of grace, then, is the word of God through John: "the Word became flesh, and tabernacled among us"!! God Himself becomes a man, flesh, yes, comes to live with men, to tabernacle in our midst – as symbol of His covenant faithfulness! You see: God had not forgotten His covenant; because of sin God had withheld the evidence of His covenant! But in Jesus Christ God was pleased to return to His own, to live with His people again. He came back, this time not in the temple of Jerusalem; He came back in Jesus of Nazareth! That Child in the crib of Bethlehem was not a baby like so many; that Child was the tabernacle of God, in Him God "tabernacled" among His people once more! Through that Child God's Word would come to His people again; Christ Jesus would tell Israel who God was so that those who heard Jesus in fact heard God (Jn 14:24). And through this Child sacrifice would be made for sin so that reconciliation with God is possible; "He will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21).

Again, then, my brothers and sisters, Christmas is not about the birth of just any child, nor of a child of any holy man, or even of a man who claims to be a god. Christmas is about God Himself, Creator of heaven and earth, becoming a man, coming to tabernacle, to live, in the midst of a sinful people so that this people might be assured of His covenant faithfulness to that people. Christmas, then, is more, far more than a sweet story, and definitely far more than a season to be jolly and get caught up in gift-giving. Christmas is a time to marvel at God's mercy, is a time to be excited, so excited that the God who withdrew from the temple because of sin actually came back –though sin remained so stubbornly among His own!– came back to underline His covenant faithfulness, came back to bring God's Word of life to sinful flesh, came back to pay for sin itself! "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us": here is news like there is no other, news that shows us the marvellous glory of God Most High, news that spells out God's infinite grace and truth.

⁶ See William D Dennison, "Your Life is the Worship of Jesus Christ", in *Kerux* (Vol 1, No. 2), pg 40f.

O yes, this God-become-man has died, has departed this life; we cannot go to Bethlehem or to Nazareth or anywhere else to visit Him. But let me remind you then that He died as *God-in-the-flesh*, died not as a victim of death but as master over death. That's why He rose again, triumphantly. The sin that prompted distance between God and man was paid for, taken away. So it was that this God-become-man received from His Father a place at God's right hand in the heavens.

His ascension from us does not mean His absence from us, though. This very same Jesus who became flesh in order to tabernacle amongst us once said this to His disciples:

"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him" (Jn 14:23).

You heard it, beloved?! God is pleased to *continue to live with His people!* It's true that the Jesus born at Christmas ascended into heaven, but He promises to live with His people always, to make His home with His own –Pentecost! The Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ was poured out, and so Paul could write to the Corinthians that their own *bodies* were the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Cor 6:19).

You see: the marvel of Christmas has not yet ended! God Himself, almighty and holy God, still lives with men – despite the sins that drove Him from His temple of the Old Testament! He's come to us as abiding evidence of His covenant faithfulness, come because the distance between God and man has been bridged, bridged not by a man becoming God –how should that ever be possible!– but *by God becoming a man*. He has come to us, not we to Him, and that's a reality that remains a fact even today – though Christ has long ago ascended into heaven. He has come to us, and is with His own still in the Holy Spirit – God in our midst, Immanuel.

This, my brothers and sisters, is the gospel the world around us rejects. The world would make one religion of all the religions that be, would tell us that at bottom all religions lead us to the one only God. But it is not so, beloved! Not a single religion provides the recipe for people to reach God. But the Christian faith tells us *how God reached out to people!* The Christian faith tells us of Christmas, of holy God sovereignly becoming a man in order to dwell in the midst of His people.

Truly, what a gospel God has prepared for unworthy sinners!